Professional pride and a Cajan law officer
"A Head Full of Homicide" - - - - NEIL MARTIN
ANC
Short Stories
March 10th
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Part I of a new serial of those gunslinging pilgrims . . . . . Badger and Blizzard
"Your Bones in the Brush"
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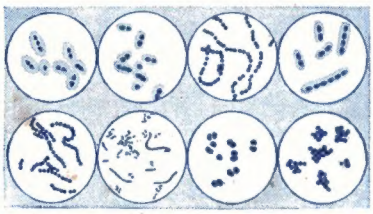

TOP ROW, left to right: Pneumococcus Type III, Pneumococcus Type IV, Streptococcus viridans, Friedlander's bacillus. BOTTOM ROW, left to right: Streptococcus hemolyticus, Bacillus influenzae, Micrococcus catarrhalis, Staphylococcus aureus.

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D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

March 10th, 1948

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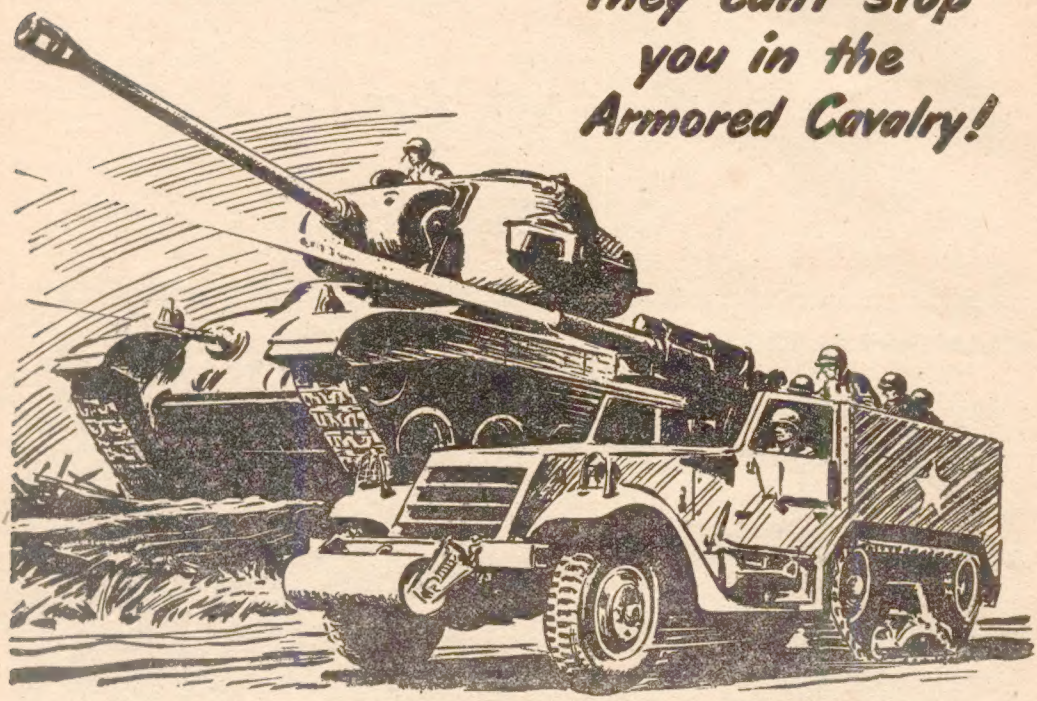
they can't stop you in the Armored Cavalry!



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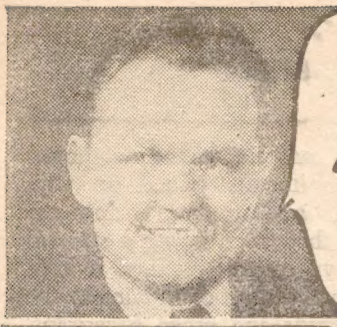

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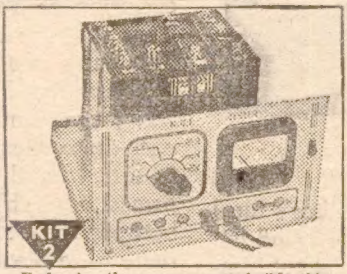

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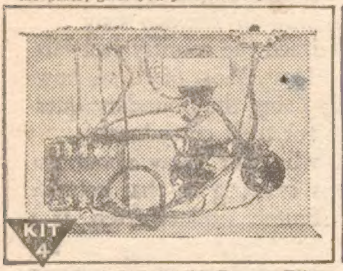

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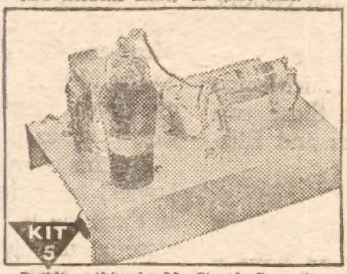

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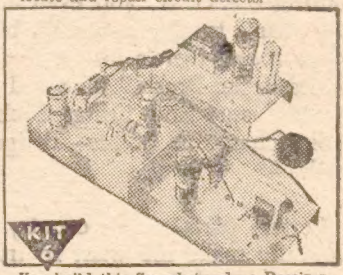

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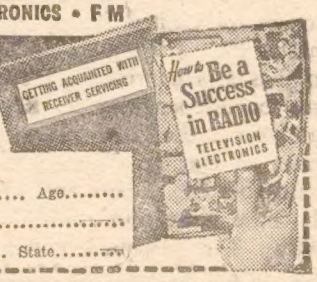


The Story Tellers' Circle

Storygenic

CADDO CAMERON is the editor's ideal of an author—he writes such grand letters about his stories, his readers, about himself, about fiction, about ancestors, about touring the U. S., and even about editors. We shan't trouble you with his comments about *them*. Here's his letter about "Your Bones in the Brush," his serial which starts in this issue and brings back those two choice characters of his—Badger and Blizzard:—

Certain parts of this country of ours just naturally make me want to try to write a story about their past whenever I get to thinking over their history or happen to visit them. Far as I'm concerned, storygenic is the word for them, but there ain't no such word. The Southwestern corner of Texas is one of these regions, the country lying between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers, a piece averaging one hundred fifty miles wide and three hundred long, which for many years was called "The Bloody Border Country." It sure earned that name, too.

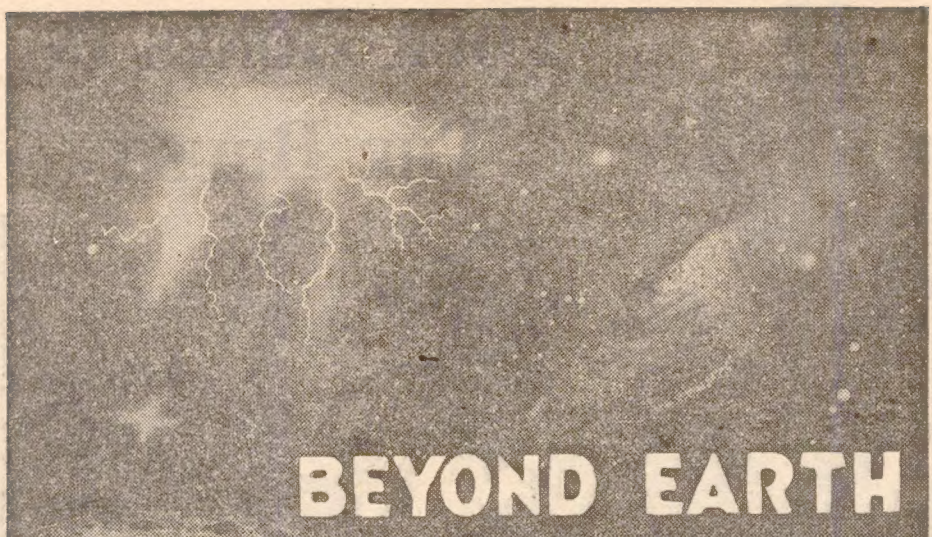
That country was a battleground for, perhaps, a longer period than any other section of the United States, commencing back in the 1700's when its first settlers fought Indians and continuing through the Texas war for independence in 1835-36, the Mexican War in the 1840's, the war between the states in the 1860's and the private war which border Texans and Mexicans waged all these years and right on down to the 1880's. This private war was a more or less free-for-all. Texas born Mexicans, (Tejanos —pronounced Tayhahnos,) often fought with their American friends and neighbors, and American criminals joined up with Mexican bandits raiding from below the Rio Grande, so that when laying a story in this country a writer isn't justified in casting Mexicans in the roles of villains to the exclusion of Texans and other Americans. They split the dirty work up between them on a fairly equal basis.

When Sam Houston licked Santa Ana at San Jacinto and Texas won her independence from Mexico the Rio Grande was established as the boundary and later confirmed as such by the Treaty of Hidalgo between the U. S. and Mexico in 1848, but there were plenty men on both sides of the river who paid no mind to treaties: Texans who swore that the line ought to run smack down the main drag in Mexico City and Mexicans who claimed the country eastward to the Nueces, at least. Most of these, however, were merely using the boundary question as an excuse for their cussedness.

In this story, whatever I say about the lawless conditions existing in that country at the time is definitely underwritten. If I were accurately to describe many of the atrocities that occurred down there SHORT STORIES would not publish what I had written, and readers wouldn't believe it if it were published. The characters in the story, however, are representative types common to the time and region. Sorry to confess, though, that when giving the manuscript its final reading it struck me that I had not done justice to the brush and the dangers and miseries attendant upon riding it astraddle of a horse trained to work it. Go down there and talk to some scarred-up and stove-up old boy who has spent his life aworkin' stock in it, and you'll see what I mean.

WITHIN the last month we have driven through what used to be "The Bloody Border Country." The brush is still there, perhaps more than there was in the 1870's because it has swallowed many of the open prairies that old-timers talk and write about, but the lawlessness of the old days has

(*Continued on page 144*)



BEYOND EARTH

What Strange Cosmic Power Influences Humans?

BY WHAT RIGHT does man presume that he is the chosen being of the universe and that the earth alone shapes his existence? In the infinite spaces above, tenanted by vast and magnificent worlds, are Cosmic forces which influence the life of every mortal. As iron filings respond to the attraction of a magnet, so too, your acts are the result of an impelling influence upon your will. Just as the unseen Cosmic rays give the earth form and substance, so too, from the infinite reaches, an invisible subtle energy affects the thought processes of every human. Life itself bows to this strange universal force—why, then, should YOU not understand and COMMAND IT? You are like a pendulum either to be swung forward to happiness and the fulfillment of your dreams, or backward into discouragement and disillusionment. Why remain poised in a state of anxiety, uncertainty, and anticipation? Learn to draw to yourself these Cosmic forces which will give your mind the creative impetus that will assure the end in life you seek.

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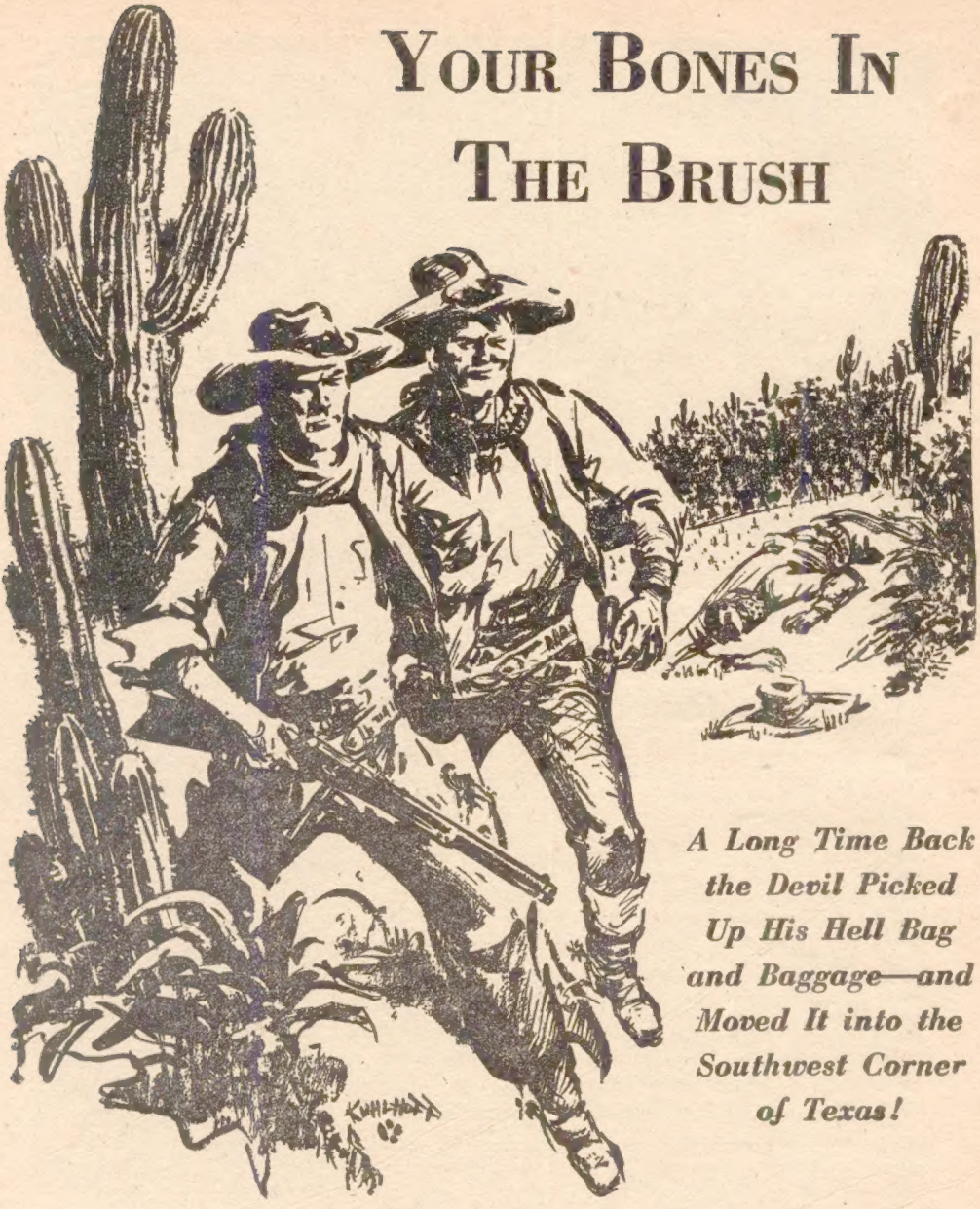
Your Bones In The Brush



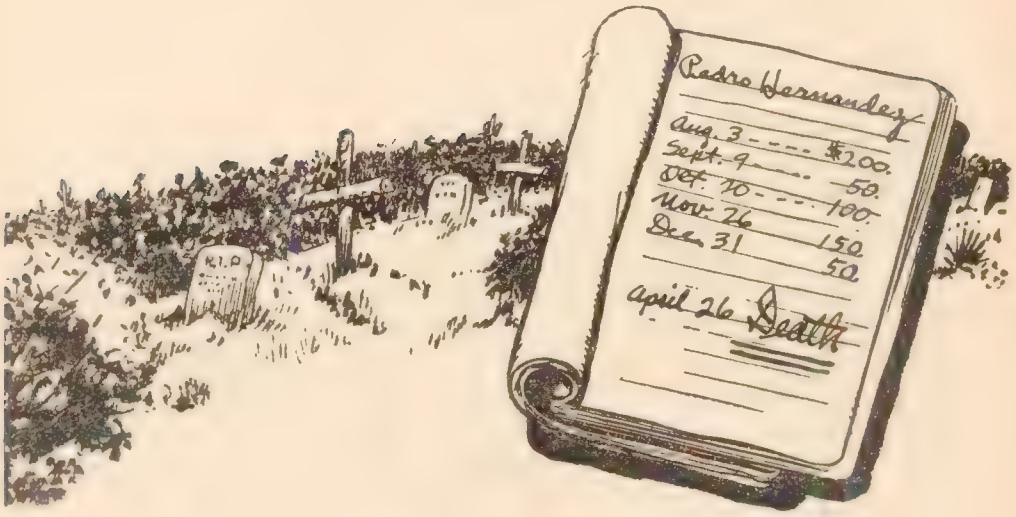
A Long Time Back the Devil Picked Up His Hell Bag and Baggage—and Moved It into the Southwest Corner of Texas!

"BOYS, I'm going to offer you a chance to leave your bones in the brush of Southwest Texas, perhaps, and at the same time to perform a great service for the State. That's why I sent for you. Smoke?"

The Adjutant General of Texas opened the humidor on his desk and pushed it toward the two Rangers seated in his office at Austin. They responded, each according to his nature. Red-headed Sergeant Blizzard Wilson shifted his lean six-feet-six in an upholstered chair as if it were not half so easy sitting as saddle leather and helped himself to a cigar. Afterwards, he thoughtfully stroked the bridge of his long nose, fingered his mustache, and drawled, "Strikes me that there ain't nothin' new about us a-takin' chances, considerin'."

By CADDO CAMERON

Part I



General Steele grinned. "Considering what?"

Blizzard scratched a sulphur match on the sole of his boot. "Considerin' that our lives have been hangin' by a hair mighty nigh ever since we joined up with the Rangers."

Notwithstanding the serious implications of the general's remark, Private Badger Coe chuckled away down in his wide chest. Except as to height, big was the word for him —a shock of curly, black hair, large and muscular face with laughter close beneath the surface of it, a brawny body that tapered from shoulders to heels and weighed two hundred odd when the young scamp was dry and hungry. He lighted his cigar, thought of several things to say and didn't say them. He wondered, *What the hell?* In fact, he had been wondering ever since they returned from leave and got a letter from Captain Hank Houston telling them not to report back to their old company. Instead, they were told to meet a mysterious messenger in San Antonio with the utmost secrecy and by him were directed to come to Austin for this interview. Must be something big in the wind.

Obviously, the general was not in a mood to joke about whatever he had in mind. "Well, boys, let's get on with this business," he said soberly. "I understand that you took a long leave of absence without pay, spent the time on the buffalo range where you made some money in hides, then bought a parcel of land on the Nueces below Uvalde, registered a couple of brands, put an old *vaquero* and his family on your ranch to look after it, and now you want to rejoin the force. I think you're foolish."

"I *know* we are," said Blizzard.

"Always been thataway," declared Badger.

"But we're Rangers," added Blizzard.

"It's in our blood," said Badger, "and I reckon we won't get shed of it until we're bled plumb dry."

The general nodded. "I know how *that* is. I'd like to straddle a horse again with a rifle under my leg. Well, here's the situation. You know as well as I, that a long time back the devil picked up his hell bag and baggage and moved it into the southwest corner of Texas—the stretch of country between the Nueces and Rio Grande —and we've never been able to run him out of there. You did some good work in that country once, but six months after you left the law was on the run again. Lawlessness down there is like crabgrass in a cornfield. Hoe out a patch and it crawls right back again. Mexico isn't to blame any more than we are. In fact, not as much. We're stronger and should be able to police

our own country. Based on the total population, Mexican and American, we furnish a higher percentage of the criminals than they do.

"That bloody border country harbors crooks from every state in the Union."

"Yes, sah, and some from across the water," added Blizzard dryly, "but most of 'em claim they're Texans."

"No foolin'," said Badger. "The crookedest tinhorn in Laredo is a Greek, but he swears he's a grandson of Davy Crockett."

"It's a dirty shame, too," continued the official. "That country could be a peaceful and prosperous region. Some claim it's the finest cattle country in the world. Plenty of honest people in there now, fighting to stay alive and hang onto what they've got, and lots more who'd like to settle there. It's strictly up to Texas to make it safe for them. The Federal Government tries to ride herd on smugglers, counterfeiters and the like, but the Secret Service can't be bothered with thieves and murderers who hop back and forth across the line. The Army won't go into Mexico after them and they raise Cain when we Texas men do. Prominent citizens in that border country bombard us with demands for Rangers. Meanwhile, the legislature cuts our appropriations. We could use three companies of Rangers below the Nueces until the country is tamed. As it is, we've got one camped at Rio Grande City now, eight men short, and certain big cattlemen are putting up most of the money for its support. But, as I said, it's up to us. We've got to find a way to do the job. That's where you come in."

GENERAL STEELE paused to fire up a cigar of his own. "My records show that you have worked under cover ever since you first enlisted. With the changes in personnel and the way we've had to cut the force since you've been away, there aren't many men now in the service who know that you are Rangers. Throughout Texas and adjoining states you're thought to be gunmen, more or less outlaws who time and again have dodged the pen by the skin of your teeth. You have a large acquaintance in the underworld, both friends and enemies."

He paused, grinned at them through smoke. "This is our first meeting, but you can see that I already know a lot about you."

Badger's big face broke into a boyish smile. "Maybe *too* much."

Blizzard crossed his long legs and dangled a boot. "Maybe not enough."

"And maybe a little of both," said the general dryly. "Here's my idea and it's going to be tough on you if you take the job. You don't *have* to take it, understand. Working out of here and responsible directly to me, you go into the border country as outlaws. Nothing new about that. You've done it before. You won't have to pretend. I'll see that you're established as such in the minds of all the lawmen in the country. There will be no specific charge upon which you can be arrested legally, but some of them may try to corral you on general principles. Be careful that you don't get caught in bandit roundups by citizens' groups, Minute Men and the like. They hang a man so damned quick he hasn't got a chance to prove who or what he is. Sounds bad, doesn't it?"

Blizzard Wilson ran a long hand over his stringy red hair. "Bad!"

Badger grinned with one side of his large mouth. "Well, sah, it shore sounds bad enough to be right interestin'."

Steele nodded, continued, "Use your own judgment about posing as lone wolves or throwing in with some gang. That's up to you. Steal horses and cattle, stick up stages, rob banks if you can find a bank anywhere, do any damned thing you're a mind to, just so long as it helps you to get a line on the real crooks and what they're fixing to do. Before you leave today, I'll tell you how to communicate with me and not uncover yourselves."

Blizzard spoke up, "D'you calc'late there's any one man or bunch of men a-bossin' the dirty work down there?"

"Hard to tell," answered the general. "That country is full of all manner of people and strange things happen on the border. There are outlaw bands, of course, some larger and better organized than others; but they're all independent gangs and you'll find many crooks operating alone, or in twos and threes. I might name a few big men whom we know to be leaders. Maximo Sarna, descendant of one of the early Texas settlers who owned all of that country be-

fore the Americans came, is a large property owner whose holdings occupy both banks of the Rio Grande above San Ygnacio. He's into everything and he hates Texans. Tom Blaney headquarters at Laredo. Nobody knows what all he's mixed up in, but everybody knows that he's bad and so far no one has had the nerve to testify against him. Scott Ferris is a gunman, a killer and the most dangerous man of the three. His home ranch is northeast of Sarna and southeast of Laredo. If you tangle with Ferris, look out for him and *get him*. We have reason to believe that he has led some of the most murderous raids Texas ever experienced."

The general frowned thoughtfully for a moment, continued, "If those men were eliminated, or better still—publicly humiliated by arrest and conviction or in any other manner, it would go a long ways toward cleaning up the border. The little fellows would get scared and County officials would gain confidence. However, that's your business.

You'll be going down there to turn as many crooks as you can over to the law and the more of them you wipe out yourselves as gunfighters, the better I'll like it—unofficially, of course. I'm satisfied that you *two men* can do more good down there, unhampered by legal restrictions, than could *three companies* known to be Rangers."

The general stopped abruptly. He looked from one to the other, and said, "I won't order you to take this job. That might amount to a death sentence."

Blizzard ran a hand down his long, bony jaw. "Reckon you don't have to sentence us to nothin', General. We're takin' the job."

"Oh, shore," carelessly agreed Badger. "We need action. Gettin' butter fat and plumb soft."

Adjutant General William Steele drew a long breath. His face showed his relief. "But I was prepared to offer you a very special something to tackle the job. You haven't heard about it yet."

"Don't need to," drawled Blizzard. "We done heard about the job."

"Very well, but you damned wildcats will get what I have for you, anyhow," declared the general. He glanced at a paper on his desk. "Sergeant Daniel Shadrach Wilson is promoted to lieutenant and Private Ezekiel Jedekiah Coe is a sergeant from this date. You'll receive your commissions before you leave. Congratulations, gentlemen!"

FIVE days later things were about to happen on the Texas bank of the lower Rio Grande. The sun balanced on the Mexican horizon as if it had paused there to keep an eye on two men crouching behind a clump of sage beside the old military road that hugged the river from Laredo to Brownsville. Their hats were pulled low and bandannas hid their faces to the eyes. One carried a rifle and a holstered revolver hung from the gunbelt that slanted across his narrow hips, the other wore two six-shooters suspended from crossed belts with holsters tied low on his thighs. Each had his gaze fixed upon a mushroom of dust that rose above the chaparral and sped rapidly toward them from the south.

"Are you shore that's Maximo Sarna?" rumbled Badger Coe in his deep bass. "I'd hate to waste my time a-stickin' up a U. S. marshal or maybe a army general."

Blizzard Wilson shifted his Winchester to both hands, gathered his long legs under him. "Certainly it's Sarna. We done found out that he's a-headin' for Laredo this evenin' and besides, I looked the outfit over good with my spyglass before the road hit that thicket. Get set. Here they come!"

A two-seated ambulance drawn by a team of high-stepping chestnuts swung around a sharp curve into view, encountered deep sand in the road and slowed to a walk. Three in the front seat—the driver, then a woman—evidently a servant, and another man with rifle and short gun—no doubt a guard, each a Mexican or *Tejano,* (Texas-born Mexican). Two in the rear seat—a slender, dark man of middle age, dressed in the light summer clothing of a prosperous American business man, and an old lady with silky white hair and bird-like eyes.

The Rangers arose suddenly out of the sage. Blizzard's rifle snapped to his shoulder.

"HANDS UP!" roared Badger.

The driver fell back on the lines. The chestnuts reared, pawed the air, fought for their heads. The guard jerked up his rifle. Blizzard fired twice with startling rapidity. His first bullet whipped the guard's heavy sombrero back against its chinstrap, his second nicked the fellow's ear. At that range

the tall rifleman could drive tacks. The guard dropped his gun. He lifted one hand, clapped the other to the side of his head. The horses went wild, but the driver expertly kept them from bolting. On the front seat, the woman clasped her hands and moaned a prayer to some saint. Other than a quick cry of surprise, the old lady said nothing and she watched the proceedings with a lively interest.

Badger strode from behind the sage, his big shoulders swinging aggressively, his hands brushing his holsters. "Steady!" he growled. "Be-have yourselves and nobody will get hurt."

Carefully keeping out of Blizzard's line of fire, he went and spoke politely to Sarna, "Powerful sorry to bother you like this, Don Maximo, but we won't keep you long. Get out, please, sah, and make certain to keep your hands away from that hideout you're a-packin'."

With a little bow to the old lady, he added, "Don't you be afraid, Auntie. Your boy won't get hurt if he don't get ringy."

"Of course not, Mister Bandit!" she exclaimed. "No lady should be afraid of *you*. Besides, he isn't my boy. He's my nephew and I'm his Aunt Sofia—the rich old woman he tolerates in his *hacienda* because I really own it, you know, and he is my only heir."

Badger grinned behind his mask and it must have shown in his eyes.

For the old lady went on, "You have a delightful smile, Don *Bandido*. I'm sure you're handsome."

Meanwhile Maximo Sarna's lean and swarthy face turned even darker. His voice was low, sharp, "You know me and yet you rob me? Don't be a fool!"

Badger moved a step closer. "I'm a born fool. Get out! Make 'aste!"

During the space of five seconds the aristocratic *Tejano* sat still, surveying the Ranger with scorn and defiance.

Suddenly, Badger's long arm shot out and his big hand closed on the *ranchero's* ankle. "Get out or I'll snake you out!"

"Let me go, *pelado!* I'll—!"

"You won't do nothin'. We're in a hurry. Get out!"

Evidently Don Maximo's rage got the better of him, or he decided to take a chance. His slender hand darted toward the waistband of his linen trousers. The next instant he jerked it back, for he was staring in amazement at the muzzle of Badger's Colt.

"Don't you try that again, mister!" rumbled the brawny Ranger. "You're a shade slow for fast company. Get out!"

"Do, Maximo!" urged Aunt Sofia. "Don *Bandido* has said that he's in a hurry. No doubt he has another appointment."

Sarna got out.

Badger rapidly went through his clothing, tossed a short-barreled pistol back onto the seat beside the old lady, ignored his wallet and a huge diamond ring, took a sheaf of papers and stepped aside.

"No money-belt?" asked the Ranger. "Huh-oh! Now I understand. Auntie, reckon I'll have to bother you for that little satchel you're a-makin' out to hide with your skirt. Mighty sorry."

She smiled and pushed it toward him with her foot. He went and opened the satchel without removing it from the floor of the ambulance, took out a handful of papers and closed it again. After a quick glance over his shoulder at Blizzard standing gaunt and threatening with his rifle a short distance away, Badger thrust his head and shoulders into the carriage and whispered to the old lady.

"Keep the money, Auntie," he said. "I'll tell my pardner that I didn't find nothin' but tobacco money and some papers. I ain't the kind of a fella that would rob a lady as sweet as you. *Adios, Senorita!*"

"Why, *Don Bandido!*" she exclaimed coquettishly. "Such chivalry. Now I *know* you're handsome. Let me see your face—just one little peek. . . . No? And those shoulders! *Madre de Dios!* But, in truth, though I may act the part, I am not a *senorita*. One knife, one bullet, one horse have buried my three husbands. Oh-la-la! *Adios, Bandido Hermoso!*" (Handsome or beautiful bandit.)

When told to get back into the ambulance and go on about his business, Maximo Sarna paused with a foot on its step. He looked long and viciously at each of the Rangers. His thin lips tightened into a hard line. Badger had the uncomfortable feeling that it would take more than a bandanna to stop the gaze of the *Tejano's* piercing eyes and nothing short of revenge would satisfy the demands of his injured pride. After a moment, Sarna stepped in and sat down. He snapped

an order to the driver and rode away looking straight ahead, jaw set, chin in the air.

A small hand showed briefly outside the rear curtain, waving a tiny handkerchief!

THE Rangers had tied their horses in a small arroyo nearby. Badger's giant black, Belial, touched his master's shoulder with a velvety nostril as if to make certain that the big fellow was all right. Badger playfully pulled the horse's ear and swung into the saddle without touching a stirrup. Blizzard's tall, Roman-nosed roan, Solomon, rolled an eye at the lieutenant and looked wise. Badger often swore that Blizzard and his horse were enough alike to be twins.

As they set out for their camp in a thicket east of Laredo, Badger observed, "Well, by dogies, that stick-up starts us on our way."

"On our way to hell, more'n likely."

Badger chuckled. "Don't you think it was pretty slick the way I gave their money back to 'em without makin' the old boy suspicious?"

"Gotta admit that it was, much as I hate to," answered Blizzard, "and I shore hope he figures you're sorta off in the head, which you mostly are."

Badger did the cooking in camp this evening while Blizzard went carefully over the papers they had taken from Maximo Sarna. Most of the stuff didn't interest him and was of no particular value to Sarna, with the exception of a memorandum daybook and three somewhat cryptic letters—two addressed to him and one written by Don Maximo for mailing to a man in Monterey. The daybook was especially interesting. In it were twenty names, each heading a page of its own containing entries showing dates and amounts in dollars. At first glance Blizzard took this to be a time book. Closer examination, however, proved that it couldn't be and the lieutenant decided that it was a record of collections Sarna had made from these men. The longer he studied the daybook, the greater his interest.

Take, for example, one "Pedro Hernandez" under whose name there were five entries of amounts ranging from fifty to two hundred dollars over a period of six months. The last of these entries was in December. There followed, "April 26 . . . *Muerte.*" (Death.) Written in red ink!

Other names in the book, five of them, bore the red-ink notation, "Death." How, why and where these men died furnished the tall Ranger food for thought. It was a matter of common knowledge that, in this lawless region, many of the small fry looked to the big fellows for both political and armed assistance when needed and paid for it out of their illegal gains—sometimes with stock or goods, more often in cash. Perhaps this was a record of Maximo Sarna's dealings with such men. If that were true, those who had failed to kitty as much or as often as he thought they should, had their earthly accounts closed by the red entry, "*Muerte.*"

Blizzard copied all the names into his own tally book, including the dates of the red-ink notations. At the first opportunity he'd mail Sarna's daybook to a certain man in San Antonio who would see that it reached the Attorney General. It might fit into information already accumulated in the general's files.

An envelope taken from Don Maximo's pocket contained a note asking him to come to Laredo this evening and sit in a private game at The Border Cantina. It concluded, "Scott Ferris will be here. Come loaded for bear. No limit." Signed, "Tom Blaney." This gave Blizzard more food for thought. . . . Sarna, Ferris and Blaney, whom the general had branded as three of the big crooks on the border, sitting together in an all-night poker game. Of course, there'd be at least two more in the game. . . . But, what the hell!

He looked across the cooking fire at Badger, and inquired dryly, "How'd you like to ride into Laredo tonight and get yourself killed?"

The big fellow slapped a mosquito on the back of his neck, cussed, and replied, "I'm too young to die, but you ain't. When do we start?"

THE moon was up and going strong when the Rangers forded Zacate Creek in Laredo a short distance above its junction with the Rio Grande and walked their horses by devious ways to a shed behind The Border Cantina. They knew Laredo and the town knew them. It knew them as a brace of dangerous gunmen, remembering the day a few years back when Badger's six-shooters and Blizzard's rifle had built a smoke at the old Indian crossing above Fort McIntosh on

the edge of town in a battle with a bunch of border bandits who had robbed and killed a friend of theirs. Tonight, however, they had no intention of renewing old acquaintances. Blizzard hoped to be able to finish the job he had planned and get out of town with very little fuss and bother. As for Badger, he didn't give a damn one way or another. He left the planning to his partner and did his thinking on the spur of the moment when the fun started.

The Border Cantina was one of the largest combined saloon and gambling houses in Laredo and Tom Blaney owned it. A one-storied adobe, long and wide, its small windows were recessed high in the wall and guarded by hewn bars of mesquite wood. There were two back doors. One opened into a passage that led to the main room, the other entered a large private room that extended two-thirds of the way across the rear of the building. Another door opened into this room from the passage.

The night was hot and although the outside doors were closed, all windows were opened wide and uncurtained. Blizzard walked to one of the three that ventilated the private room and, because of his height, was able to stand out of its shaft of light and look in. Five men were seated at a table near the south end of the room. The place was lighted by two hanging reflector lamps, one immediately over the table so that Blizzard could see clearly all the faces around it.

After one quick look he muttered an oath under his breath. In addition to Blaney, Sarna and Ferris, (the first and last-named he identified from descriptions) there were Pancho Mendez and Bill Smith, outlaw leaders of small bands that were reputed to be among the most vicious murderers operating on either side of the line. The lieutenant had hoped, perhaps, to find a couple of Laredo business men in Blaney's game tonight. Though the three big fellows would probably know when they were licked and behave accordingly, they'd be hard enough to handle without having to deal with a pair of killers who wouldn't know anything but fight.

Blizzard pondered the situation for a moment. His eyes shifted from Tom Blaney—a burly six-footer with a square jaw and a red face, to Scott Ferris—small, dark, wiry and wolfish, then on to Maximo Sarna, the cultured aristocrat who looked out of place in this society. Mendez and Smith must have lately made a cleaning, otherwise, they wouldn't have the money to buy into this game. As he looked at the two murderers, the tall Ranger's cold gray eyes narrowed a trifle and his high-boned face set in lines that were actually cruel. Those killers snapped their fingers at the law. The way things were in this country now, the law couldn't punish them. But *he* could. He could take the law into his own hands and make those rats pay the price of their sins. They'd fight, so he sentenced them to death.

Walking quickly back to Badger and the horses, Blizzard told him what they had run onto, adding, "Those polecats are damned sure of themselves. I doubt whether either door is locked. They're a-settin' close to the south end of the room. The outside door opens into the north end and so does the one on the inside. We'll try 'em both. You take the outside 'cause it's closest to the table. The room is big, so I'll pack my rifle. I'll handle Mendez. Smith is your'n. Gunfire is mighty nigh shore to snuff out one of the lamps—maybe both of 'em, but we'll gamble that it don't. If it does, get to hell out of there. I'll cover you. Let's ramble."

THROUGH open windows came noise from the saloon proper. A bunch of drunks were singing, others were laughing and howling—a big racket for which the Rangers were thankful. Badger carefully lifted the latch on the outside door, pushed slightly. It wasn't barred. It would open on silent hinges. Blizzard went quickly through the outside door into the passage. Badger chanced opening his door a little so as to look through the crack and watch for his partner. He saw the latch rise noiselessly and the door move cautiously. With bandanna pulled to his eyes, holding a six-shooter, he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. At that precise instant Blizzard strode in, bandanna mask in place, rifle at full cock and held in his right hand as if it were a short gun.

"Steady, gents!" rumbled Badger just loud enough to be heard distinctly. "Deal us in. Smith! Mendez! Hold 'er!"

No use! The two gunmen-killers reacted after the fashion of their breed, more or less instinctively no doubt. While the other smarter men froze in their chairs, they threw

themselves backward from Badger's side of the table and went for their guns. The ripping report of Blizzard's rifle tore though the roar of his partner's six-shooter. The dark and slender Mendez died while falling, shot through the heart. Smith's stocky body jerked at the shock of two bullets from Badger's Colt. The outlaw's gun blasted the roof. He rolled onto his back, gasping.

Although too wise in the ways of gunfighters to make a pass at a weapon when the other man had the drop, Scott Ferris tried a sneak draw under cover of the shooting. Blizzard had kept one eye on him. Scott's hand slipped from the table at the instant the tall Ranger's rifle exploded. The next instant he was looking into the muzzle of it! His hand went back to the table-top and came to rest there, clenched so tightly bones showed white through his dark skin.

The north lamp at the Rangers' end of the room went out. The other light leaped to the top of its chimney, hung there an instant, fell back and went on burning. Through the thick inner wall and the door behind Blizzard came the sound of men yelling, wanting to know, wondering who did the shooting and where. Employees and others alike would be slow to invade the private room.

Badger moved quickly through gunsmoke to Tom Blaney, who was banking the game at the far end of the table. Snatching Big Tom's black hat from his head, the sergeant drawled, "Ex-cuse me, sah. I'll make shore that you get it back."

Blaney's face and neck bloated. His sharp little eyes darted from Badger's six-shooter a yard away to Blizzard's rifle at the other end of the room. He obviously hesitated for an instant, thought better of it, left his hands palms down on the table. Blizzard always swore there was something about a rifle at short range that took the starch out of any man. Scott Ferris looked for all the world like a starving wolf at bay. Maximo Sarna calmly lighted a cigarette from a case and matches on the table beside him.

Exhaling smoke, he fixed his fine eyes on Badger, and said easily, "So we meet again, Don *Bandido*. You are a swashbuckler, but a gallantly courageous man. You should have lived in the days of knighthood. I'll close your eyes with twenty-dollar gold pieces when I bury you."

Having emptied the contents of Blaney's coin rack into the hat, Badger had started away. Now he paused, nodded to Sarna, and said in Spanish—which he spoke better than English because he didn't know so much of its slang. "Thank you, Don Maximo. I shall use your gold pieces to buy cold drinks in hell. Pay my respects to your charming aunt, Dona Sofia."

In English, he added, "So 'long, fellas."

LEAVING Laredo boiling with excitement the Rangers lit out for their camp in the brush, Belial and Solomon pushing the country behind them so fast as to make pursuit out of the question at night. When a safe distance away, they halted to breathe their horses and listen. Apparently, they had the night to themselves out here.

Hooking a leg around his saddle-horn, Badger went to rolling a smoke. "What I mean, this has been one busy evenin'. I'm enjoyin' myself a-plenty, but I don't know what in hell it's all about. Talk some, won't you?"

Blizzard built him a cigarette, too. "You ain't got nothin' much on me, 'cause I'm still more or less in the dark," he drawled. "But I think I see a speck of daylight—just a speck. This is the first time we ever set out to corral mighty nigh everybody in a big slice of Texas and a chunk of Mexico. Heretofore, we've gone after some one man who was a-bossin' the deviltry. Maybe we knew who he was and maybe we didn't, but there was only one of him whoever he was. That made it simple."

Badger thought of some of the mysteries they had solved and long manhunts they had made. "Yeah," he muttered. "Powerful simple. Go ahead."

"This time, though," continued the lieutenant, "we've only got the names of three top dogs and there may be a dozen more of 'em for all we know. Likewise, there's two-three thousand little dogs a-snappin' at the heel of the law and if we corral or wipe out the top dogs and don't convert the little dogs, some of the little fellas are shore to take the big fellas' places. Then we're right back where we started. It's a hell of a mess."

"Shore is, and I like it."

"Huh!" sniffed Blizzard. "That's 'cause you're a born bandit your ownself. Anyhow, here's what we're a-figurin' to do. Maybe

it'll work and maybe it won't, but if it don't nobody but us will be any worse off. That there book of Sarna's just goes to show that the top dogs in this here dog fight have stomped the little dogs a-plenty and made a heap of enemies among 'em, but the big dogs are a-jumpin' so high-wide-and-handsome the little fellas dassn't do anything to 'em. The law in this country is in the same fix as the little dogs. So, here we come. We show the local law and the little fellas that the big fellas *can* be hurt same as anybody else and we ain't afraid to hurt 'em, then pretty soon their enemies will be comin' to us to help 'em get square with the big dogs and we'll learn a heap of things that we don't know now. Likewise, when the good citizens see the outlaws fightin' among themselves, I won't be at all surprised if the citizens shake out their loops and do some first-rate hangin' of bandits and crooked county officers."

"Sounds sensible, all right."

"Yeah-h, and if we ain't damned careful we'll get hung with the balance of the bandits."

Badger grinned all the way across his big face. "Then why don't we hit for home and go fishin'? Them Nueces cats are mighty fine eatin'."

"Because you ain't got sense enough to stay at home nohow," declared Blizzard. "As you said a while back, we've got a pretty fair start towards makin' the big dogs look sheepish, but we've still got a long ways to go. Our toughest job is to stay alive. Meantime, we'll just hunt cover for a day or so and let the news of what we've done sorta agitate around. Then we'll take Tom Blaney's hat to Laredo and give it back to him in front of everybody."

"Godamighty! *You* take it! I'm goin' fishin'."

OLD Laredo, founded in 1755, had seen a lot of life and done a lot of living; but the town had never been more alive and lively than it was tonight, two days after the hold-up, when the Rangers stepped down at the rack in front of The Border Cantina. Badger was carrying Tom Blaney's black Stetson hat. Each went to a front window to look the place over before venturing inside. Men were going and coming on the hard-packed dirt sidewalk and more than one called his companion's attention to them, whereupon whispering and low talk ensued. Evidently the news had gotten around as Blizzard anticipated. His height and Badger's size would, as he had known, serve to identify them anywhere and they had masked their faces for the sole purpose of making the robberies appear genuine.

The saloon was comfortably filled. All the games were going strong, the long bar was lined with standing drinkers and several sitters were sleeping it off at tables scattered along the south wall. Badger quickly spotted Blaney in the lookout's elevated chair at a faro layout over in a far corner. Afterwards, he took the motley crowd apart in search of faces that he knew and found several—Texans, *Tejanos* and Mexicans, honest men and crooks but mostly crooks, one of these being a deputy sheriff and another a county judge.

Blizzard joined Badger and they were at the point of going in. A man on the sidewalk stopped, moved carelessly over and leaned against the wall near them—a small wiry fellow in the working clothes of a cowhand. His face was sharp beneath a big hat that rested on his ears and he had a sly and slippery look. Pretending not to notice him, they fell to talking about a pair of drunks who were weaving down the middle of the street arm-in-arm, dragging their boots in the dust and howling the song about Mustang Gray.

When the drunks had caught the attention of most of those on the sidewalk nearby, the stranger spoke in a husky whisper, "Fellas, you better stay out of this place. Blaney is a-layin' for you."

Neither Ranger looked at him. "We're shore much obliged to you, Mister," said Blizzard, "for you're takin' a hell of a risk. Somebody might see you talkin' to us."

The little fellow darted glances to right and left. "You're dead right," he whispered. "Come to Border Belle's. She wants to see you."

"Thanks, stranger," said the lieutenant. "Go and wait for us. We were goin' to see Belle anyhow, soon as we got through here."

The man ambled away as if he were walking to see the sights and not at all particular where he went.

"Slippery cuss," observed Badger, "and no fool, I betcha."

Blizzard agreed with a note of elation in

his voice. "Yep, and I'll gamble that he's one of the little dogs I was talkin' about. Been stomped by the big dogs."

Badger grinned. "Didn't take 'em long to find the bait we put out."

"Nope, and there'll be more of 'em," declared the lieutenant. "Wonder what Belle wants with us? She used to be Tom Blaney's woman."

"Uh-huh, used to be."

Blizzard's long fingers stroked his chin. "Reckon we better go see Belle, sure enough. If she's a mind to, a used-to-be woman can deal her one-time man a heap of misery."

Badger chuckled. "Tom may need his hat. Let's go."

Blizzard figured that the grandstand play they were about to make would be of use in his campaign to humiliate the big men in this border underworld, otherwise he wouldn't have undertaken it. He didn't believe in grandstand plays. Badger, however, was something of a show-off. Like many of the young frontiersmen of his day and region, the larger his audience the better he performed. This job was made to order for him. The Rangers had already discussed such details as could be planned in advance and having worked together for so long, each knew about what the other could be depended upon to do in any unforeseen set of circumstances.

Although the little man had said that Blaney was laying for them, Blizzard didn't think that Tom would expect them to walk openly into his place of business. If the outlaw *had* set a trap, it wouldn't be in the main room of The Border Cantina. So they went in—Badger first, Blizzard and his rifle at the big sergeant's heels.

Tom Blaney saw them at the door. He climbed down from the lookout's chair and lumbered toward them, elbowing men out of his path. Badger went to meet him with a wide grin on his good-natured face and his old Stetson riding at a jaunty angle. From time to time the young Ranger waved a salute with his empty hand, calling out a greeting to someone he knew as if he considered himself a welcome guest in the place. By the time the men met in the middle of the room its noise had dropped to a whisper. A moth frying in a lamp on the wall could be distinctly heard and the clicking of a roulette ball was a noticeable sound.

MEANWHILE, Blizzard had stepped quickly to the right so as to place solid adobe at his back. Rifle ready, he stood there motionless, saying nothing, the flat crown of his hat not far below the log ceiling beams, his long lean face stern and forbidding, his sunken eyes appearing to catch every movement in the room no matter how slight. It was his job to protect Badger from Blaney's friends and he'd do the job mercilessly.

"Howdy, Tom!" boomed Badger. "Here's your hat."

Blaney took the hat with his left hand. His big red face was splotched with white. His voice was hoarse, "Where did you get it?"

Standing less than an arm's length from Blaney the brawny Ranger shifted his weight to one leg, hooked his thumbs in his belt, and drawled, "Well, sah, you see it's like this. I just naturally picked that skypiece up."

Obviously, everybody knew about the affair in Tom's private room and they knew who pulled the stick-up and killing. Here and there men coughed, others got busy with their smokes and several snickered outright. This bit of horseplay was giving one of the big men a heroic dose of humiliation that Blizzard had prescribed for them. Blaney had the look of a man fixing to have a stroke and wishing for a secluded spot in which to have it. Taller than Badger and at least thirty pounds heavier, he might have been expected to use his fists. Instead, he flipped the hat into the Ranger's face with his left and made a pass at his gun with his right!

Badger Coe was at his best in conflict with the unexpected. He didn't have to think. His perfectly trained reflexes did the right thing. With his left he blocked Blaney's gunhand, spoiled the draw. He drove his right fist in an uppercut to the underside of the big man's chin with all the strength in his magnificent arm, shoulder and legs. Lack of science was more than offset by the terrific power behind the blow. It landed with a crunch and all but lifted the 250-pounder out of his boots. Blaney's head snapped back, his legs crumpled and he collapsed in a heap.

At that precise instant, Blizzard's high-pitched voice rasped out, "Barkeep! Don't you—!"

The crack of his rifle finished the sentence.

Under cover of the excitement one of the bartenders had sneaked a hand beneath the bar while his other held a quart bottle of whiskey. Blizzard's bullet exploded the bottle in his face. Glass fragments cut his lips and slashed his cheek. He dropped a sawed-off pistol-length shotgun, lifted his hands.

With the exception of the Rangers and sleeping drunks, everybody dived for such cover as the room afforded. Badger called out jovially, "No call for you to stampede, fellas! Far's me and my pardner are concerned there won't be no more gunplay. We ain't mad at nobody."

He glanced down at Blaney, grinned, and added, "When Old Tom wakes up, tell the cuss that the next time I fetch him his hat I'll expect him to thank me like a gentleman. So 'long, boys!"

This speech was greeted by whoops and laughter and invitations to drink. As far as Blizzard could tell, Blaney supporters were in the minority here in his own saloon and the ridicule he had sustained would certainly cost him plenty of these. Frontier underworld characters were fickle in their allegiances. A high cockalorum could hold his following just so long as he maintained his exalted position in their society and ridicule would clip his spurs quicker than anything short of death.

Badger backed to the door and out, Blizzard following. They started down the sidewalk. From his point of observation outside a nearby front window a man stepped between them, took each by the arm. Badger was keyed as taut as a fiddle string. An instant later his gun tickled the stranger's belly.

"Godamighty durn!" cried the man. "Hold yo' hosses! I'm plumb pious and peaceable!"

The Rangers looked down at a hawk-nosed, weasened little fellow with white hair and mustache and "Old-time Cowman" written all over his wiry frame.

"Sorry, Mister!" exclaimed Badger. "Mighty sorry. I aim to be plumb polite and sociable to strangers myself. Badger Coe is the name now, and this here amblin' santy-peed is Blizzard Wilson for the time bein'. Shake!"

They shook hands. The old-timer drawled, "No offense, Badger. I'd oughta have better sense than to pinch a rattler's tail thataway. Me—I'm Stonewall Jackson Smith. Folks mostly call me Stony. Maybe I am. I own a patch of ground and a parcel of stuff over on the Salado. SJS is my ranch brand. Ever run onto it?"

"Yes, sah," chuckled Badger, "and I'm here to tell you that your SJS beef shore eats noble."

"Is that a fact?" asked Stony seriously. "Glad to hear it, 'cause I ain't never tasted the stuff."

Blizzard grinned down at the old cowman. "You're a right modest man, Mister Smith. They tell me that you own about two hundred other brands and I'll swear I've seen SJS horses and cows all the way from the Gulf to Canada."

"Do tell?" drawled Stony. "Must've been thieves a-drivin' of 'em. And that reminds me. I want to make medicine with you ring-tailed rannahans. Whereabouts is they a safe place in Laredo for honest folks to talk?"

"We wouldn't know about *that,*" answered Badger. "There ain't no safe place for us west of the Mississippi."

Blizzard suggested, "How about Border Belle's? That always struck me as a safe place—if you're handy with a gun."

"Huh!" snorted the old man. "Safe for a man of my age, maybe. Let's go to Belle's, but don't tell Ma Smith that you ever seen me there."

BORDER BELLE'S was a wide-open dance hall with all the trimmings and no holds barred. The impressive name on its huge sign read:

THE INTERNATIONAL AMUSEMENT PALACE

and its employees justified the name: American, Mexican and Chinese bartenders and waiters; percentage girls from the U. S., Mexico, Cuba, France, Chile and China; piano player, a remittance man from England known as The Duke; guitarist, a reformed or scared bandit from Mexico; fiddler from the cattle ranges of Texas and the penitentiary at Huntsville; and pickpockets, thugs and thieves from everywhere—not carried on the payroll, but fed and alcoholed and protected by Belle so long as they split with her. The Devil only knew where Belle herself came from. It was known, however, that she ruled this ancient two-storied rock

building on the border with a strong and wicked hand.

Evidently the latest news had reached The International before the cause of it did. When the Rangers and Old Stony walked in, a dance had just ended and men and women were on their way to the bar and tables. Someone caught sight of the newcomers.

"Here they are now!"

The Rangers found themselves the point of interest for all eyes. Badger liked it, Blizzard was fussed and Stony Smith took cover behind them. Their names were known and had been talked about, for there were cries of, "Howdy, Badger! Hi, there, Blizzard! Fetch me my hat, Badger!" and many more of like nature. From the endbar a big redhead with two guns on his legs and his skin full of liquor, boomed, "Here I am, boys! Stormy Red, The Red Raider from Red River Valley! Look me over good! I'll make you a hand, boys, and I'll do to cross the border with!"

Other drunks and getting-drunks took up the cry and in no time at all Blizzard tallied at least ten offers to ride with them. Of course, the men were tight. Nevertheless, it showed that the three grandstand plays had brought to the surface an undercurrent of hatred for the big fellows, a thing that Blizzard had hoped for and gambled on.

Laughing and waving a hand in response to their boisterous reception, Badger led the way to an empty table in a corner. Blizzard dropped back so that Stony Smith walked between them. The lanky Ranger realized that he was taking chances by bringing the old cowman into this outlaw den and firmly intended to see that nothing happened to him. He knew a lot about Stonewall Jackson Smith. Captain of a band of Minute Men and a fighter from who laid the chunk, the old-timer had helped to kill or capture and hang many a bandit without process of law and as a consequence was, perhaps, more thoroughly feared than any county officer on the border. Blizzard, however, had a mighty good reason for wanting to be seen here with Stony Smith.

They were scarcely seated before Badger grabbed a little Mexican girl and galloped away into the next dance. Blizzard told a waiter to fetch three beers. The little man who spoke to them at The Border Cantina was now standing at the bar, looking his way. A nod of the Ranger's head brought him over.

Shoving out a chair with his foot, Blizzard said, "Set, stranger. I ordered you a beer. If you don't like it I'll drink it myself. Wilson is my name. Folks mostly call me Blizzard."

The little fellow looked doubtfully at Stony, inquiringly at the Ranger, then offered his hand. "Glad you got here, Blizzard. I already knew your name. Mine is Reynard—Foxy Reynard down here on the border."

Blizzard had been trying to figure what the little cuss reminded him of and that was it. A fox—smart, sly and quick as a flash. He introduced the cowman.

Foxy's pointed face broke into a dry grin as he put out his hand. "I reckon Blizzard doesn't know you, Mister Stony Smith. This is funny. *You* a-shakin' hands with *me* over a beer."

"Betcha I've touched hide with worse men than you," declared the old-timer. "Shake, Foxy."

The lieutenant glanced innocently from one to the other, and drawled, "Reckon I don't quite catch on."

Reynard cocked an eye at Stony, and said, "You're buyin' a beer for a man who packs the law, a law of his own, vigilante law. Stony Smith is the hangin'est man in Texas!"

Fixing his cold eyes on Smith, Blizzard stroked his lean jaw reflectively. "Do tell? Is that what you wanted to talk to us about, Stony? Did you want to tell me and my pardner where and when you aim to string us up?"

Foxy Reynard laughed without a sound.

Old Stony chuckled. Nodding at the little man, he asked Blizzard, "D'you want me to talk before him? He's the slickest horsethief on the border."

"Shore!" declared Blizzard. "Why not? I like a horsethief if he's slick, providin' he don't pester *my* stock."

The old-timer tilted his bottle, drowned half of it and briskly smoothed his mustache. "Suits me. I'll talk and I don't give a damn who hears me. When I heard how you and Badger made fools out of Sarna, Blaney and Ferris and wiped out them killers—Mendez and Smith, I says to myself, 'They're just the men I've been lookin' for.' So I quick go and talk to our

sheriff and some of the boys. He swears that you jaspers are outlaws your ownselves. Allows he has just got word that you're wanted from hell to breakfast for mighty nigh everything."

Stony Smith paused, grinned, and went on, "He wasn't tellin' me nothin'. I already knew *that* about you, knew it from a long time back."

"Is that a fact?" drawled Blizzard. "Too bad."

"It don't make a particle of difference to me," declared the cowman. "A fella can put out more fire with fire than he can with water and it's a sight easier. Now, here's my proposition. You-all ride my range, pack my iron, guard my stuff and I'll pay you regular wages, plus Two Hundred Dollars cash for every bandit scalp you fetch me and Three Hundred for every one you catch alive."

"Mmm-huh," said Blizzard. "So they're worth more on the hoof. How come?"

"What this country needs to clean it up," answered Stony, "is a bandit a-hangin' on every tree where honest citizens can watch 'em kick. Thataway folks will grow the guts to elect the right sort of county officers and back 'em up, and maybe do a little hangin' of their own. Understand?"

Blizzard fingered his mustache. "Calc'late I do. What happens if me and Badger get shot or caught and hung by some of your honest neighbors?"

"I'll pay my neighbors the same bounty I'm a-payin' you!"

Blizzard laughed aloud—a rare event.

Foxy Reynard again laughed silently.

"Of course," added the old man, "it goes without sayin' that you've got to be caught with the goods or, so help me, I'll hang the man that hangs you!"

"Now, that's a heap better," drawled the Ranger. "If I get hung it'll be powerful consolin' to know that the cuss who hangs me has got to pay for the rope that does it."

"Well," snapped Stony. "What say? Are you a mind to take the job?"

PRETENDING to think hard, Blizzard went to rolling a cigarette. Presently he said, "We're shore much obliged to you, Stony, but I'm afraid we can't do it. You see, we've got a big job of our own. There's some scalawags down here on the border who have done us dirt and we're out to get square with 'em. Still got a hell of a long ways to go. Another thing, too. Me and Badger are a-ridin' the outlaw trail now and I imagine we'll just keep on a-ramblin'. Savvy how it is?"

The old cowman bristled. He banged the table with his fist. "Hell, yes! I savvy that you ain't got a brain in your head. Man—in my day I've gentled many a wild horse. Give me half a chance and I'll gentle you. Think it over. I gotta hit for home."

Asking Foxy Reynard to come along, Blizzard picked up his rifle and followed at Stony's heels. Many a black look was aimed at the old man on the way to the door. Foxy stopped there, but the tall Ranger ambled along two yards or so behind Stony to the corner of the building. There the cowman halted and turned to say something. A man leaped at him from shrubbery growing against the wall. Steel flashed. Blizzard struck with the barrel of his rifle—struck in the nick of time, although he had half expected something like this. He caught the arm that drove the knife at Stony. The next instant he jabbed the muzzle of his rifle into the would-be assassin's ribs. The old cowman jerked his six-shooter.

"Stony!" snapped Blizzard. "Hold 'er! He's got a busted arm."

At the same time he pushed the man aside with his rifle and stepped between them. Stony Smith cussed and moved quickly to where he could get a shot at the slender Mexican, who now cringed fearfully, hugging his right arm with his left. Foxy came at a run.

"Smith!" barked the Ranger. "Stop it, I tell you!"

"Damned if I will! He's a greaser bandit. I know the—!"

Blizzard slapped the old man's six-shooter from his hand. "When you calm down," he said quietly, "you'll be mighty glad I didn't let you kill an unarmed man."

Stonewall Jackson Smith said nothing at the moment.

Turning to the Mexican, the tall lieutenant inquired casually in Spanish, "Why did you try to kill *Senor* Smith?"

The Mexican was almost breathless from pain. "He . . . he and his vigilantes hung my brother."

"Was your brother a bandit?"

"Yes . . . he was a bandit working for Tom Blaney, *Senor* Bleezard, and so am I a bandit."

"What is your name, *hombre?*"

"Eduardo Hernandez, *senor.*"

That name called to Blizzard's mind Maximo Sarna's book and its red entries. "Do you have a brother or cousin, Pedro?"

"I did have a brother Pedro. He, too, was a bandit. Pedro is dead now."

"Killed by Maximo Sarna or his men?"

"Yes! Yes! *Senor!*" cried the Mexican. "Killed by Sarna himself. But how did you know?"

"Maximo Sarna is my enemy, too," said the lieutenant. "Go, Eduardo, and have your arm dressed. Do you have money to pay a doctor?"

"Oh, yes, but thank you just the same," declared the Mexican. He bobbed his head, and went on fervently, "When my arm is well I will ride for you, Don Bleezard. I will *die* for you."

"Thanks, *muchacho*" (boy), "but I do not want a man to die for me," said the tall Ranger dryly. "When my time comes I will do my own dying."

The Mexican backed into the bushes and disappeared.

"Eduardo clean forgot his knife," said Blizzard, picking it up. "Here, Foxy. Give it to him next time you see him, will you?"

All this while, Stony Smith hadn't said a word.

The Ranger reached down and got his revolver. "Here's your Colt, Stony. Betcha dust got in its works. Better give it a good cleanin' before you try to drill some cuss sudden."

The old cowman took the weapon. He glared down at it, turned it in his hand, holstered it with a jab. "Right now I don't never want to see the damned thing no more." Thrusting out his hand, he went on, "Much obliged, Blizzard Wilson! You kept me from doin' a dirty trick. You're an outlaw I reckon, but you're white plumb down to the marrow. Now, I'm a-headin' for home where an old fool like me belongs."

Nodding to Reynard, Blizzard said, "We'll mosey down to the livery stable with you, Stony, if that's where you put up your horse."

"Much obliged, boys," growled the old-timer. "Damned if I don't need a guardeen, for more reasons than one."

When they started back to The International the tall Ranger grinned down at his runty companion, and observed, "Strikes me that Old Stony was sorta ashamed of himself."

"He'd oughta be!" snapped Foxy. "He's too infernally quick on the shoot and handy with a rope, and he's got the meanest fightin' men on the border a-ridin' for him. He pretends to be so all-fired honest. Huh! Honest, hell!"

THE lieutenant suspected that Reynard was telling the truth. Although professional bandits and other crooks were blamed for the lawlessness in this country, many a supposedly honest citizen—a tower of strength in his community—settled his own personal feuds and did his own stealing while the outlaws were doing theirs, so that *they* got credit for his misdeeds. This was one of the Rangers' problems and no small one, at that.

Blizzard thanked his lucky stars for Foxy Reynard. He didn't know where the little horsethief fitted into this crazy border puzzle, but he did know that the man would be invaluable and he intended to win the crook's confidence if he could devise ways in which to do it. For that reason he had made it a point to keep Foxy within hearing while with Stony Smith. Having anticipated that the cowman would make an attempt to hire their guns, Blizzard had told him to talk in the thief's presence so that Foxy would hear him turn the proposition down. Now, Reynard would spread the news and it ought to help. Since he had brought her message to the Rangers, evidently the little thief was trusted by Border Belle, which might be a fact of considerable importance. Belle was *somebody* in this border underworld. Blizzard had already planned to make use of her and her honky-tonk girls in gathering information if he could for, as he often said, "Enough liquor and the right gal can make Old Satan himself tell the story of his life and what he's a-fixin' to do next."

Badger was dancing again and with the same Mexican girl when Blizzard and Foxy returned to their table. Apparently, news of the trouble outside had not reached the

dancehall. The lanky Ranger looked for and found no sign of hostility towards him as a result of his coming here with Stony Smith, a possibility that he had feared. The slightest suspicion that he and Badger were not what they pretended to be would prove fatal.

Foxy ordered more beer. Afterwards, his sharp and shifty eyes regarded the Ranger intently for a long moment. "Now, don't you go and get riled, Blizzard, but I've got to ask you a certain question. Old Stony Smith ain't no friend to men like us. Why in the devil didn't you let that knifer finish the job?"

Blizzard didn't hesitate an instant—knew that he dare not. "I brought the old man here and he trusted me enough to come. Besides, I make it a point to do my own killin'."

"Fair enough!" exclaimed Reynard. "I hated to ask you, but I had to see how you'd take it."

By nature, Blizzard Wilson's bony face was more or less fierce to look at and he could make it more so. "Well, you saw!" he rasped out. "And if you ain't satisfied, I don't give a damn!"

Foxy dropped back in his chair. "Hold on, mister! I ain't lookin' for trouble with the likes of you and your pardner. I'm your friend—see? As a fella says—we've got common interests."

"What are they?"

Reynard got quickly to his feet and pulled out another chair. "Here comes Belle. She's one of 'em. If you ain't interested in Belle, you'd oughta be."

Blizzard saw her coming around the dance floor from a room in the rear. Only blind men failed to see Border Belle when she was anywhere in the vicinity, for she was a woman born to attract the attention of men and hold it until they got to know her and like her notwithstanding her vices. Tall and possessed of curves natural and artificial, she wore her mass of blond hair piled high and free of bangs and curls in defiance of current fashion. Belle's eyes matched her face—large, intelligent, alert and alive with the primitive joy of living an unrestrained life. If her sins ever brought remorse, it didn't show on the surface of her. She had the hands of a lady of leisure, the feet of a woman half her size, and she wore diamonds and emeralds in good taste and with the air of one who considered them pretty trinkets that contributed little to her beauty and nothing at all to her worth as a woman. Black silk was becoming and tonight she wore precisely the right amount of it to appeal to men from the solitudes, hungry for the sight of a woman.

If Belle ever had another name she kept it a secret and where she came from was a mystery. She wasn't a Southern woman and didn't talk like a Yankee, though she could mimic either, and she spoke the languages of men of all classes—highest to lowest. To hear her cuss was a privilege—to take it from her an ordeal.

Blizzard knew all this about Border Belle, yet realized that he didn't know the half of it. He watched her move through the crowded place in a hail-fellow, slap-'em-on-the-back manner, swapping crude quips with rough men in a husky voice and making friends of strangers with a touch of her hand, a dazzling smile, a ready tongue and a profound knowledge of men and their infirmities. The Ranger now wondered where Belle fitted into this border puzzle and why she had sent for them.

BLIZZARD got up and Reynard began an introduction. She put out her hand, announcing jovially, "Save your breath, Foxy. I've been knowing this old boy for years. Howdy, High Pockets! How they stackin'?"

"Just middlin', Belle," drawled Blizzard, always awkward in the presence of women—any kind of women. "You're a-lookin' mighty peart and pretty yourself." Then he added with a dry and sheepish grin, A heap better'n you did the last time I seen you."

Belle thought for an instant, then burst out laughing. She laughed like a man. "Why, you damned old mossy-horn! You *would* remember that."

They sat down. She told a waiter to bring a bottle of champagne from her private stock, and went on to say, "That was before I knew you, Foxy. Don't *ever* let Blizzard Wilson wangle you into a poker game."

She stopped there. Reynard glanced at the Ranger, and inquired, "What happened? If the joke is on Belle, I'm a-dyin' to hear it."

BLIZZARD crossed and uncrossed his long legs, shifted his rifle six inches along the wall behind him, and began, "Well, you see it's like this. We're a-settin' in a little game of draw, me and Belle and some other bandits, when she bets two big pair high enough to win in any kind of poker."

He paused, stroked the high bridge of his nose, and added, "Only I happened to hold three puny little deuces. Reckon that's about all there is to the story."

"Not by a damned sight!" exclaimed Belle. "While this old wrinkled-neck is raking in the pot he offered me a blue, and said he calculated I didn't have eating money left to carry me until I could roll another drunk. That's what he said!"

"Then somethin' blew up in my face," drawled Blizzard, "and I left out from there with my shirt tail afire."

They all laughed, Belle louder than either of the men. A Chinese waiter came with wine and she told him to take it to the card room.

On their way back, she halted Badger in the middle of a dance and asked him to join them there as soon as his partner would turn him loose. Catalina, the pretty little Mexican girl, pouted, then said he could go now if he'd promise to come back soon. Belle called another waiter and told him to give Catalina percentage checks for two bottles of wine.

None other than hand-picked guests were ever entertained in Border Belle's rather luxuriously furnished card room, guests known to have money or something else she wanted to do them out of. Blizzard was still wondering what she had up her sleeve and why Foxy Reynard was getting in on it. Belle may have read his mind, though she probably figured what he was thinking about, being expert at that where men were concerned.

At any rate, when they were seated around a beautiful mahogany table—perhaps carved in Mexico and smuggled across the border—she nodded at Foxy, and said, "If you happen to wonder why I carry this along wherever I go—he's my ever-lovin' man now. I fell hard for the little thief and it'll break my heart if they ever hang him."

Badger chuckled, and declared, "I'd say that you're both mighty lucky and here's hopin' that neither one of you ever fills a loop."

"Belle is lucky," drawled Blizzard, "and Foxy will be until he out-holds her with three deuces."

When the laughter subsided, she went on to say, "The damned little fool! I tried to get him to live here and help me run the business, but he swears he'll see me in hell before he lets a woman keep him. So he goes out and makes an honest living stealing fine horses."

"Don't blame him a particle," said Badger.

"Me neither," allowed Blizzard. "It'll take a calf-size loop to hang him and they're easy to dodge."

The woman fixed her clear, blue eyes on Blizzard quizzically, and said, "High Pockets, I'll gamble that you're working your brain to a shadow trying to figure why I sent for you."

Badger cocked an eye at his partner, and declared, "A shadow of a brain is all he had to start with, Belle, but I've been thinkin' some."

"Be still!" snapped Blizzard, "and give the lady a chance to talk, if she's a mind to."

Border Belle smiled at them. "This idea isn't mine. It's Foxy's. He's full of ideas. That's one reason why I go for him. Anyhow, we want you to start trouble on the border and we'll make it damned well worth your while."

"Trouble?" asked Badger soberly. "Me—I don't want no trouble with nobody, never."

"What makes you think that we *can* start trouble," inquired Blizzard, "and what d'you call 'worth while'?"

Belle and Foxy exchanged quick glances. "You've already started trouble," she declared, "trouble with three of the biggest and meanest crooks on the border. I don't know why you did it and everybody is trying to guess, but you've done it and that's more than anybody else has ever had the nerve to do—inside or outside of the law. Those men have been riding rough shod over everybody down here. They pull together pretty well and we're afraid of them—got a right to be."

"Who's 'we'?" asked the lieutenant. "If you don't mind sayin'."

"The little men like Foxy and me," she

answered quickly. "One-horse crooks operating one-cow outfits, is the way you'd probably put it. The big devils take what they want from us and try to make us pay for what we get by the sweat of our brows. Between them, they think they own the border."

Blizzard nodded. "That's nature—human and hog, but mostly human. You ain't said what 'worth while' means to us."

"Here's our proposition," continued Belle. "We'll furnish you all the men you need—men you can depend on, specialists in almost every line—and you lead them. Wipe out Sarna, Blaney and Ferris. Steal them out, run 'em off, kill 'em off! You take a fourth of the loot and split the balance with your men, cutting Foxy and me in for a share apiece. Meanwhile, you make this your headquarters. Every dollar you spend in here will be refunded to you at breakfast the next morning. Does that sound worth while?"

The lanky lieutenant sipped his wine, smoothed his mustache, and allowed, "Sounds so-so, providin'."

"Providing what?"

"For one thing—providin' you take care of the legal end if the law ever corrals us," answered the Ranger. "Sometimes that costs scads of money."

"Hell, yes, I'll handle the law!" exclaimed Belle. "I've got something on damned near every county officer on the border. They dance to my music or they don't dance!"

"Mmm-huh, right interestin'," mused Blizzard. "How's about new men comin' in at next election? It ain't far off."

"Look, High Pockets," she said smugly. "You have no right to ask—but just leave that to me. Didn't I tell you that we've got specialists in almost every line of cussedness? Some of our specialists are professional voters. If necessary, I can move half of Mexico into Texas for the next election and get away with it. But we've never needed to do that. We work ballot boxes, work voters that are entitled to vote and slip in some who aren't."

"Sounds sensible," admitted the Ranger. "How d'you 'work' a voter, if it's any of my business?"

"It isn't!" snapped Belle, "but I'll give you a hint. If you had a wife, kids, horses, cows, goats or sheep in this county and a bunch of men with gunny sacks over their heads called you to the door some night and told you how to vote, how would you vote?"

"That's a fool question," replied Blizzard. "Another thing—if we ain't got no better sense than to tackle this here job, will you fix it so that your barmen, waiters and girls pick up all the news they can about what these other fellas have done and are gettin' set to do, then you or Foxy slip it to us? That'd be a big help."

BELLE favored him with a particularly sweet smile. "We're so far ahead of you, you can't even taste our dust. They already do that for us. Right now, I'll betcha Catalina can tell me Badger's grandmother's maiden name."

Blizzard faked surprise. "Can't hardly believe it." He went on to ask, "With you pullin' so many political wires down here, Belle, how do the three big men get what they want the way they do, if you don't mind sayin'?"

"That's none of your damned business!" said the woman sharply, "but it won't hurt to tell you. Even if you wanted to squeal on us, you couldn't prove a blasted thing and you wouldn't live long enough to get into court. Those three men pay me for my help. Now, they say they're getting tired of paying."

"Huh-oh!" grunted the Ranger. "They hadn't oughta be thataway. They might meet up with a bunch of talkin' gunny sacks."

"Now you're dealing 'em, High Pockets!" exclaimed Belle triumphantly. "So you're throwing in with us?"

"All depends," hedged Blizzard. "D'you know—it sorta strikes me that Blaney, Ferris and Sarna ain't the big bull rattlers on the border after all."

"Yes, they are!" she insisted.

"Nope. . . . *You* are!"

Belle's perfect teeth made her boisterous laugh all the more pleasing to men. "Not yet, but we will be." She placed a hand on Foxy's arm. "Won't we, honey?"

Reynard smiled at her as a grown boy might regard an older sister who ruled the roost around home. Afterwards, he looked hard at the Rangers, and said, "We'll hold our own down here, Belle, with the help

of the fightin'est pair of men I ever saw or heard of."

"We haven't got their help yet," she said impatiently. "What are you stalling for, High Pockets? A bigger cut?"

"I don't hardly know," replied Blizzard. "You see—me and Badger have always worked as a two-horse team. We ain't never throwed in with nobody. When we've got troubles, we keep 'em all for ourselves and don't cut anybody else in on 'em. If we've got a job of work to do, we do it ourselves. Thataway we know that it'll get done right or wrong and nobody but us to blame either way. Badger, how d'you figure this here situation?"

The Big Ranger grinned, poured himself another glass of wine. "I don't figure. Too daggoned much work. Besides, that's always been your job. All I've got to say is, me—I shore like the idea of free livin' in a place like this."

Blizzard grinned, the others laughed. He continued, "I calc'late we'd better cogitate a little before we give you our word, folks. When we make a bargain we aim to keep it and see that the other fella does likewise. You've gone and told us a-plenty, Belle, but you don't need to be afraid that we'll cause you trouble on account of what we know—now." He grinned with his eyes. "Later on, maybe."

An autocrat, accustomed to having her way with men and women who didn't bargain with her, Border Belle showed her disappointment in a burst of anger. "Just try to shake me down, Horse Face, and I'll string you up! Spill your guts to the Rangers tomorrow and I'll give you ten-to-one that they can't prove a damned word of what you tell 'em! Now, get to hell out of here. You're afraid to throw in with us. Don't come back until you're ready to do it. Get out or I'll have you thrown out!"

Foxy had placed a hand on her arm, tried to stop her tirade. She shook him off. The light of battle flamed in Badger Coe's boyishly good-natured face, but, as usual, he waited for his partner to make the next move in this scrimmage of wits. Lanky and drawling Blizzard Wilson would be awkward and somewhat ill at ease around any woman so long as she behaved like a woman—good or bad, but when Border Belle stepped into a man's boots and threw masculine profanity and insults at him his normal poise in the presence of men returned with a vengeance.

His light eyes were icy, his voice level and cold, "Sic your thugs onto us to throw us out, Belle, and we'll tear this infernal dive to pieces and scatter it to the four winds. You're plumb spoilt rotten. When you can't have your way, you climb onto your high horse and expect folks to scatter. We ain't a-scatterin' *none*. Now, see that you get that through your dumb skull."

Her large eyes opened to half again their normal size. She listened, mouth ajar, then started to speak.

"Be still!" rasped Blizzard. "And listen, if you've got the brains to listen when a man talks sense. We're out to get the three men you're after. We can do it without your help, but you can make it easier for us by tippin' us off to what they're a-cookin' up whenever you catch onto anything. If you don't want to do that, to hell with this lousy joint of your'n. We'll get 'em anyhow. And if you go to hatin' us so much you throw in with them, by the Eternal, we'll get you, too! Now, talk damn it!"

"Yeah, talk!" growled Badger, sitting with chair pushed back from the table and thumbs hooked in the armholes of his vest. He had been keeping an eye on Foxy, and spoke to him rather than to Belle. "What he says goes double for me. You said we were afraid. Still think so? If you're hard to convince, we'll stick up this dive and take every dollar in it—*right now!*"

"Jesus, Belle!" exclaimed Foxy Reynard. "They'll do it and get away with it, too!"

"Yes, I know," she said quietly. "My mistake, boys."

PLAINLY, Border Belle had not erred in her judgment of men. This astute harpy perhaps knew more about the strength and weaknesses of Badger and Blizzard than they themselves knew. By virtue of brains, personal charm and utter lack of morals she had risen to the top of the underworld and her rise had made of her a domineering person. She tyrannized her "girls" by her own forcefulness and their fear of her. She had her way with most men through a superior knowledge of the sex and its vulnerabilities. In this instance Belle had simply

let her arrogance run away with her judgment momentarily and she now set about rectifying that mistake with characteristic skill.

In turn she looked each of the Rangers in the eye, smiled as if ashamed of herself, and said, "Fellows, I'm a damned fool. I've known you for a long time. I know better than to get tough with you. But, hell! A woman has a right to get mad and blow up, hasn't she? Forget my cussedness, will you? Stay here tonight. I'll close the doors and the place belongs to you until tomorrow noon, ten of the prettiest girls on the border and the best food and liquor in North America. You slapped me around so hard my head is woozy. I need a good drunk to sober me up. We'll all get so damned tight we tell the truth about ourselves and lie like hell about everything else. Let's go, boys!"

Badger's big face plainly showed that he needed no second invitation. If the truth were known, the somber-visaged Blizzard would have liked nothing better than thus to relax and enjoy himself, for he took the responsibilities of a job like this much more seriously than did his younger partner and the burden was already riding heavily upon him.

"That's mighty white of you, Belle," he remarked, "but we've got a job of work to do and I reckon we'd better do it, then play some. It's time we were a-headin' back to camp. Got anything else to tell us before we go?"

She didn't urge them to stay. Instead, she answered, "Yes, I have—something that Badger's girl, Catalina, told me just before you came in. Or, why not go and get her, Foxy, and let the girl tell them her story?"

Reynard quickly brought Catalina Ruíz, a *mestizo,* (mixed Indian and white) girl scarcely out of her teens. Seated at the table with a glass of wine, she talked in rapid Spanish embellished with graceful gestures and emphasized by the emotion of her type. . . . Her sister, Alicia, was the wife of a *Tejano ranchero,* Felipe Sanchez, whose ranch was situated east of Laredo. Tomorrow a cattle buyer would take ranch delivery of several hundred cows that Felipe had gathered and pay in cash. Not trusting banks, Felipe would hide the money at home. Scott Ferris had somehow learned of this. But, of course, the country crawled with spies. The Ferris foreman, one Charley Jones—a big man with black hair and brown beard—had gotten drunk in The International yesterday and told Catalina that he would lead a raid on the Sanchez *rancho* soon after dark tomorrow. On the very next day he would return to Catalina with much money to buy wine for her.

"Oh, *madama!*" cried the girl. "They will torture Felipe and my Alicia until they tell where the money is hidden. Then those *bandidos* may kill them. Who knows? It is always so. You have heard. You know!"

"Yes, Catalina, I know," answered Belle kindly, "but I promised you to warn your sister in time."

She looked inquiringly at the Rangers. "Is this little girl's story something that you ought to hear?"

Badger heaved himself out of his chair. "Shore is!" he growled. To the girl, he said in Spanish, "When I return, my Catalina, I will bring you the scalps of *bandidos* and buy you wine with my *own* money."

Blizzard had nodded, gotten up and reached for his rifle. He spoke to Catalina in her native tongue, "Thank you for telling us, *senorita.* We know how to find Rancho Sanchez. Tomorrow we hope to enjoy the hospitality of your sister and her husband. Keep secret your meeting with us."

In English, he added, "Shore much obliged to you, Belle. It's time for us to ramble. So 'long."

THE following afternoon the Rangers halted their horses in a motte of liveoaks on a gentle ridge overlooking a wide expanse of rolling prairie, broken here and there by thickets of brush and groves of larger trees, scouts thrown out by the advancing chaparral which would over-run the remaining open country in years to come. The sun was three hours high and Rancho Sanchez wasn't over thirty minutes distant. Behind them the old Mexican cart road to the Rio Grande—one of several such—wound and bored its way through an immense thicket of brush from ten to fifteen feet high, armed with cutting and stabbing weapons ranging in size from almost microscopic poisonous spines on some leaves and forms of cactus up to thorns like daggers and tough as steel. In this *brasada* or chaparral

lurked prickly pear as high as a man on a horse, more rattlesnakes per acre than anywhere else in the world and men as poisonous as the snakes, far more dangerous. Here was a natural haven for wanted men from both sides of the Rio Grande, teeming with wild game and domesticated meat, water for those who knew where to find it, complete seclusion and comparative safety for anyone who took the trouble to locate a hidden spring and make his home beside it.

Badger fanned himself with his hat, burrowed in his ear with a stubby finger, cussed gnats, heat, the country and the Attorney General of Texas. He went on to say, "Yander's that dust you been talkin' about every time we got to where we could see daylight in the brush. Wonder what in hell is underneath it."

Blizzard had his hat off, mopping his face with a bandanna. He squinted toward a feather of dust now rising above chaparral that bounded the prairie on the north. "Damned if I know. Maybe a band of mustangs or a *manada* of mares. Movin' too fast for cattle unless somebody is a-chousin' 'em along. They'll strike open ground pretty soon, then I'll put my glass on 'em."

"It ain't Charley Jones and his raiders," observed Badger. "They'll come from the west, more'n likely."

"Uh-huh," agreed Blizzard, "and they'll be takin' it slow and easy so's to save their horses for the getaway."

"Yeah," grunted the big sergeant, "and if our luck holds and they make the raid, I aim to do my damnedest to see that none of the sons-of-dogs get away."

Eyes on the dust, Blizzard nodded, and said, "Yep, but I figure that we'd better take Jones alive if we can and shoot to cripple as many as we can."

"Cripple 'em? Kill 'em dead, you mean!"

"Nope," drawled the lanky lieutenant. "We want 'em to spread the news. A cripple can talk, but a dead man don't have much to say."

As the dust neared the edge of the chaparral, Blizzard took a small brass telescope from a case tied to the pommel of his saddle. Badger had always sworn that his partner owned the eyes of an eagle and poked fun at him for carrying the glass. Nevertheless, Blizzard had used this six-power telescope while on the buffalo range and now declared that he couldn't get along without it no matter how good his eyesight happened to be.

He focused on the base of the dust when it left the brush. "Huh-oh! Six of 'em and the man a-pointin' that bunch is Stony Smith."

"Whew-w-w! Minute Men! This ain't no place for us."

"Maybe not," mused Blizzard, holding his glass on the riders. "They're a-quarterin' off thisaway. Wouldn't be surprised if they aim to strike the trail we're on and head west. Calc'late we'd better not show ourselves. Just slide off into the timber here and let 'em go on by."

"Shore! We won't need their help."

"Huh!" snorted the lieutenant. "We're likely to need all the help we can get, but it won't never do for bandits to see us a-fightin' shoulder-to-shoulder with vigilantes. Somebody might get a shade suspicious."

Accordingly, they rode to the northern edge of the grove which put them at least five hundred yards from the trail. Blizzard dismounted and climbed into the thick foliage of a tree with his glass. Badger held the horses so as to guard against a nicker when they caught the scent of the others, although neither Belial nor Solomon was given to speaking to strangers. Each had been taught not to, insofar as it was possible to teach a salty horse.

"They're comin' at a lively clip," said Blizzard from the tree. "Must be goin' some place. Maybe they got wind of this raid and aim to head off the bandits. Can't never tell. Plenty spies from both sides a-workin' this brush."

The Minute Men rode the prairie past the motte of trees to the trail east of where the Rangers had left it, and there turned west. Keeping his eyes on the ground, another man now rode ahead of Stony Smith. Blizzard's glass brought him up close, whereupon the lieutenant cussed quietly, for the man proved to be a Mexican or *Tejano* and undoubtedly was an expert tracker carried along to read sign. Upon reaching the point where the Rangers had stopped on the trail, the tracker got down and went to work. The vigilantes soon disappeared in the trees and Blizzard quickly rejoined his partner.

"That damned Mex has cut our sign," he said. "A blind man can read it. In no time at all they'll find us here. We could easy

give 'em the slip in the brush or run away from 'em on the prairie, but we might cripple our horses in the thicket and I can't see no sense in runnin'. How d'you feel about it?"

"Run, hell!" growled Badger. "It's too damned hot to run."

Leaving their horses in plain sight each took a stand behind the thick trunk of an ancient tree, Blizzard on the left of open ground through which the vigilantes would probably come, Badger on the right. Pretty soon the posse came into view moving cautiously through the trees, the tracker in the lead and Stony Smith close behind him. Suddenly they halted, pointed at Solomon and Belial, talking softly. After a moment, aware, of course, that there were only two men ahead of them, they came on quickly with Old Stony now in the lead.

When they were but a short distance away Blizzard slid the barrel of his rifle through a low crotch in the tree, and asked sharply, "Lookin' for somebody, Stony? Or maybe you're just a-ridin' for your health. If you are, it's a damned sight healthier in the other direction."

The lieutenant's voice was rather high-pitched and he spoke loud enough for all to hear. They pulled their horses to an abrupt halt.

Stony Smith quickly spotted Blizzard. "Take care, boys!" he barked to his men. "It's them fightin' fools I been tellin' you about. Howdy, Blizzard! Whereabouts is Badger?"

"None of your damned business!" rumbled the big sergeant around the trunk of his tree. "But I don't mind givin' your eyes a treat."

He stepped into the open, grinning, thumbs hooked in his belt. The tracker moved his horse to the rear of the band, but the four Americans were almost abreast of Stony now. One of them, a buck-toothed fellow with a vicious face that gave him the look of not being any too bright, had hold of the handle of his six-shooter and was eyeing Badger hungrily. Suddenly his shoulder twitched ever so slightly. Things happened in a flash. Blizzard's rifle cracked. Badger's Colt leaped into his hand. Bucktooth's horse flung up its head, the tip of an ear gotched by a bullet. Even if the horse had not spoiled his draw, he would have been away late in time measured by split seconds. The big Ranger already had him covered.

The Minute Men's horses cut capers and Old Stony's big bay was reaching for the sky. "Snake!" he roared. "Damn your soul, you ain't got a lick of sense! I told you to be careful. Old Horse-Face yander could've shot your infernal eyes out and that gun-sharp, Badger, would've stitched you from crotch to chin before you could get started. Now, you take orders from me or hit for home. Savvy?"

"They're bandits!" snarled Snake, "and we're out to hang bandits. You said so yourself!"

"Sartinly!" admitted Stony, "but these here bandits saved my life t'other night and they just *gave* you your'n for nothin'. Leave 'em be!"

The old-timer grinned with his eyes at Badger, and added dryly, "Besides, anybody can see that if we try to take 'em now there won't be enough of us left to hang 'em."

Blizzard hadn't moved from the tree or lowered his rifle. He spoke up, "I asked if you're lookin' for somebody, Stony, and I'm still askin'."

"Yes!" snapped the cowman, "but it ain't you and it's time we was on our way. Better take the job I offered you. It'll keep you from gettin' hung, if you hang around in this country long."

WHEN the Rangers rounded the point of a thicket that reached ravenously out into the prairie, Rancho Sanchez headquarters spread before them at the foot of a gentle slope. Its stone house and stockade stables were old, the pole corrals had been built by former generations, and the *jacals* (thatched cabins) clustered around the main buildings were of stockade construction thatched with grass and looked as though they had always been there. Only three appeared to be occupied, the others abandoned and falling apart. A glance sufficed to show that Mexican or *Tejanos* lived here, for flowers were everywhere — bright-colored flowers of all varieties, planted with the artful taste of a people who made of flowers one of the joys of living their happy though simple lives. Riches were beyond the reach of the average Mexican, but flowers would grow for him in a rusty can or a patch of ground the size of a saddle blanket.

"One of them old Spanish places that used to be a big outfit," observed Badger. "Sorta run down now."

"Uh-huh, or more likely gettin' pulled to pieces by bandits and some who ain't bandits," declared Blizzard. "Things look peaceable. Reckon we got here in time."

Big-eyed *Tejano* children were running all over the place when the Rangers rode into the yard and a pretty woman smiled timidly at them from the kitchen door as they passed on their way to the stable. A man was working on a saddle out there. He got up and came to meet them. Short, broad, wearing the leather of a brush hand—he was a typical *vaquero* in his early thirties, smiling and greeting strangers with the traditional courtesy and hospitality of his breed.

They exchanged salutations, then he went on in English, "Step down, gentlemen, and spend the night with us. We haven't much to offer our guests, but you're welcome to what we have."

The Rangers dismounted and introduced themselves. He proved to be Felipe Sanchez owner of this, the ranch upon which he was born and had lived all his life. Moreover, he had heard of Badger Coe and Blizzard Wilson, though he didn't say where, when, or what.

The lieutenant told him, "We come here on business, Mister Sanchez. Last night in Laredo, Catalina told us that you'd deliver some stuff today and get paid in cash for it, and—"

He continued, repeating every detail of the girl's story. Before he had finished Felipe's wide shoulders sagged, his round face lost every vestige of its natural gaiety and he glanced slowly around at familiar things with a forlorn and helpless look.

Blizzard paused for a moment, whereupon Sanchez burst out, "Again! It happens again. Several times when we have had a little money thieves have come to demand it and I have given it to them to save my family and my people. I have been an honest American. My father and grandfather were honest men who fought for Texas. Why isn't there a law to protect us?"

Badger was mad through and through. "To hell with the law!" he growled. "We pack somethin' better than the law, Felipe, and we'll show you how it works tonight."

Blizzard's face had gone hard, his voice harsh. "You won't need no law this time. We're out to get square with Scott Ferris and his thieves. We'll be here tonight when they come."

The *Tejano's* expressive features instantly lighted. "You *will* stay!" he exclaimed. "You'll stay with us! *Gracias a Dios!* I'm happy again. I'm not afraid now. I've heard of you!"

The lieutenant asked, "How many men on the place?"

Sanchez shrugged. "Only myself tonight. I have four *vaqueros,* all of whom belong* to Rancho Sanchez, but I loaned them to the trail boss until he gets the cattle away from the brush."

Blizzard pondered the situation for a moment, studying the flat-roofed hacienda-type stone house and all other buildings on the place which might afford cover for either attack or defense, estimating the distance from the nearest chaparral to headquarters, weighing possibilities and probabilities and figuring what to do.

Presently, he asked, "D'you mind if we sorta boss the ruckus, if it happens?"

"No! No! Blizzard! I want you to, please."

The tall Ranger nodded, and told him, "Then have supper early—soon as you can, in fact. Move everybody from the *jacals* into your stone house, but leave lamps burnin' in the cabins. Take and put about four bright boys up in tall trees around the place where they can watch in all directions. I imagine the wall of the house rises high enough above the roof to hide a man. When we know that the bandits are comin', you go up there. Take your rifle and six-shooter and *reata.* If you've got a shotgun, load both barrels to the muzzle with slugs and take it, too. Charley Jones allowed he's goin' to lead the raiders. He's a big man with a beard. We want him alive so's to make him suffer some. When the first shot is fired, you try to snare him with your rope. Jerk the cuss off'n his horse as hard as you can, or catch him afoot and haul him up against the wall.

* By no means signifying slavery, or even the form of peonage that then existed in some parts of Mexico. He meant that, like himself, these people and their families had been born and raised on the ranch, and their fathers before them. Though in many respects treated as members of the owner's family, they were employees, paid for their work and free to leave at any time. True, some *vaqueros* got so heavily in debt to the owner, before being hired by someone else the new boss would have to pay those debts if he elected to conform to the custom of the time and region.—C. C.

Me and Badger will take the front door and windows. How does all this sound to you, Badger?"

"Sounds hunkydory," answered the burly Ranger. "I only hope that Old Stony don't run onto the raiders before they get here. They're *our* meat."

LATER on, the sun crawled down into the chaparral. Whippoorwills dived and zoomed in the twilight and mockingbirds tried a few notes in preparation for their nocturnal musicale. An eagle winged his way home in lofty solitude where the hidden sun could find him and touch the gold in his plumage. From somewhere in the north came the rumble of a pair of bulls, talking fight, and the piercing challenge of a wild stallion rode down the still air. On the nearby prairie slope a coyote pointed his nose at the sky and yapped a few times. Then he looked quickly behind him toward the trail and slunk off through the grass, turning on all his speed when far enough away to show himself.

Perched in a high cottonwood near the house, little Tomas saw the coyote. He reasoned that something had frightened it, something on the trail. A moment later his keen eyes discovered a man where the road hugged the chaparral, a man afoot and coming at a trot. Tomas slipped down the tree like a squirrel and ran to the house. After telling his story he swarmed up the tree again.

In the long front room Blizzard, Badger and Felipe talked in low tones so as not to alarm the women and children in the balance of the house and the patio. The three men decided that the man was a scout sent on afoot so as not to raise a dust, and that he'd look the place over to make certain that the ranch didn't have enough company to be troublesome. They figured that the absence of children outside wouldn't make him suspicious, since this was supper time. Badger and Felipe wanted to slip over to the brush and capture the spy.

"Wouldn't do a particle of good," objected Blizzard, "and it might do a heap of harm. When he didn't come back Jones would know somethin' was wrong and be more careful."

"When d'you think they'll come?" asked Felipe anxiously.

"When it's dark enough to hide their dust, or nearly so," answered Badger. "Those devils figure to do their dirty work here and make a run back to headquarters under cover of night. The moon ought to be up in a few minutes, though, and we'll have good shootin' light."

A full moon *was* up before Tomas sighted a band of riders moving slowly down the trail a short distance beyond the point where chaparral ended and they would have to appear in the open. Again he warned the house. Quickly the other boys were whistled in, Felipe took his station on the roof immediately over the front door, Badger and Blizzard went hastily through the house to make certain that all women and children were in the safest places available and that lights were burning where they normally would be so as not to arouse the raiders' suspicions. The house was U-shaped with a patio between its wings, closed by a six-foot wall and heavy gate at the rear. The Rangers placed the oldest boy at this gate with instructions to ring a cow bell if he heard anyone outside, then run and hide. A porch or gallery eight feet wide extended all the way across the front. The long front room had a large glazed, double-hung window upon either side of the door and another in its north end, each guarded by outside wooden shutters which were, of course, wide open and could not be closed for fear that the bandits would suspect something. The windows were open from the bottom and had lace curtains which obscured the view into the lighted room from a distance.

BLIZZARD stationed Felipe's wife, Alicia, near the lamp with some sewing. The little *Tejano* woman showed courage, her only signs of fear being the speed with which her needle flew and the frequency with which she lifted her head to listen. Looking at her there, thinking of her children in other rooms and her husband on the roof, Badger mentally cursed the country and its bandits and hoped to hell that he and his partner did their job as well as these Sanchez people were doing theirs. His stand was beside the south front window. Blizzard stood at the front window on the north side of the door, six-shooter in hand, rifle leaning against the wall near him. They had covered the window in the end of the room with a heavy

curtain, figuring that the bandits wouldn't notice it.

Badger was thankful that they didn't have long to wait. A closely bunched band of horsemen appeared in the moonlight at the point of the chaparral, halted briefly, then came on walking their horses slowly. Nearing the house they fanned out slightly. Badger's heart skipped a beat. Were they going to surround the place? Hardly likely. Their spy had probably learned or they would suspect that Felipe had loaned his hands to the cattle buyer, this being common practice, so that the ranch would be weakly defended if defended at all. As nearly as he could make out, there were ten in the band. Strength of numbers alone would give them confidence and make them careless.

Blizzard spoke quietly to Alicia Sanchez in Spanish. "They are coming now, *senora.* Remember, if one knocks open the door a little and speak naturally. The door opens on Badger's side and he will be at the wall close behind you."

Without looking up from her sewing, Alicia answered in a small voice, "I am afraid, *senor,* but those devils will not find it out."

Watching through a crack between curtain and window facing, Badger saw the raiders halt in a ragged line within twenty feet of the house and remain in their saddles. The moon found the big bearded man in the lead and held him up as a target. The Ranger's gunhand fought for its head. But Charley Jones belong to Sanchez and his rawhide *reata* on the roof. Somewhere in the house a baby went to crying. A woman's voice came softly singing a Mexican lullabye.

A bulky man on Jones' right dismounted and lumbered like a bear across the hard-packed yard and onto the porch. His big hands swung low on his thighs and his legs were too short for his body. A series of hard raps rang sharply through the silent room. Alicia got up and walked quickly to the door, opened it a foot or so. Badger followed behind her, close to the wall.

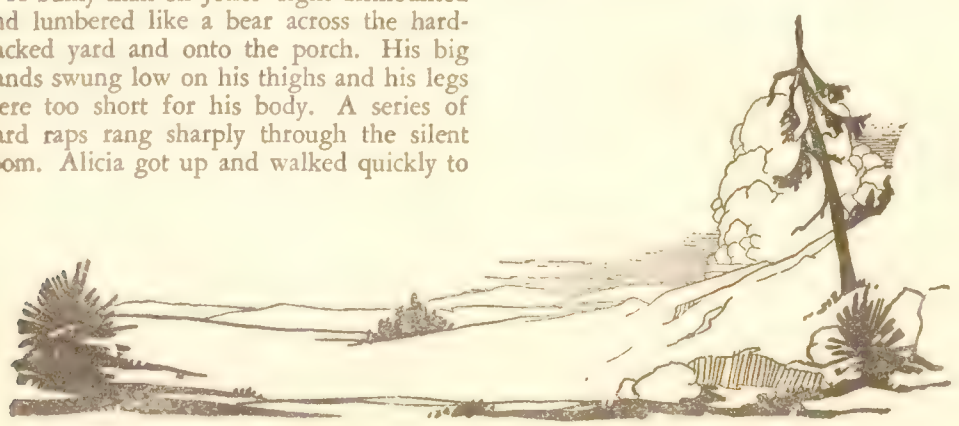
"Good evening, sir," she said in English. "What can I do for you?"

The bandit asked gruffly, "Are you the Sanchez woman?"

"Yes, sir, I am Felipe Sanchez' wife," she answered in a steady voice. "Shall I call him?"

"No! You come with me, honey!"

HIS big hand shot out and clamped on her arm. He jerked the slender little woman through the door, onto the porch. Alicia gasped, but didn't scream. Instantly Badger Coe sprang after her—two-hundred-odd pounds of fighting fury. He dare not shoot from any distance for fear of hitting Alicia. Reaching around her, like a flash he jabbed the muzzle of his six-shooter into the big outlaw's side over his heart, jerked the gun back an inch or so and fired. The blast of the explosion alone flung the fellow off the porch. He fell in the yard, his clothing afire. Badger swept the woman behind him through the door with his left, shot one man from a plunging horse and sprang back into the room with lead splashing on the rock wall and thudding into the heavy door beside him. The bandits were slow to start shooting and they shot wild, for the surprise was perfect. No doubt anticipating an easy victory, the raiders made the mistake of not dismounting immediately upon arrival. At the first burst of gunfire their horses had gone mad with fear. Men who might have fought with deadly effect, now fought to keep their saddles and empty their guns into the windows as best they could.



An instant after the report of Badger's gun roared into the night, a thin rawhide rope darted out from the roof and its loop clamped shut on Charley Jones between elbows and shoulders, pinning his arms to his sides. At that precise moment his horse lunged sidewise. Felipe Sanchez, stocky and powerful and master of the *reata,* braced a foot against the wall and jerked with all his might. Charley Jones left the saddle as if snatched away by an unseen hand. A heavy man, he crashed down on the hard-baked ground and didn't move.

Meanwhile, Blizzard had emptied his six-shooter with a speed little slower than Badger would have done it, then snatched his Winchester. He whipped the rifle up, staggered, sank slowly to the floor!

Badger saw this. He saw Alicia run to the fallen man, saw a bullet gash her upper arm as she bent over him. Afterwards, he saw only red rage and the two remaining mounted bandits in the yard. The big Ranger flung open the door. He sprang onto the porch with both guns throwing lead, alternately right and left. The fight ended in a matter of seconds.

Three raiders were galloping away, weaving in their saddles and two more who had evidently made no fight at all, were disappearing around the point of chaparral. Charley Jones and four of his men were down in the yard, insensible or dead. The man who started the fight lay where he had fallen, smoke curling up from his clothing as if the devil had already claimed him. Felipe sprang from the roof to the porch, to the ground. Badger ran back to his partner.

Alicia had ripped Blizzard's shirt half off. It was a ghastly wound to look at. Moving at a slightly downward angle, the leaden bullet had struck his chest a little above and to the left of his heart, a glancing blow that laid the bone bare and gouged a furrow to a point under his arm.

"If the shock of the bullet didn't stop his heart," muttered Badger hoarsely, "the wound won't do him no hurt."

He picked up Blizzard's hand. Eagerly his stubby fingers searched for a pulse . . . and found it!

AN HOUR later Blizzard Wilson had been waked up by a slug of good whiskey, washed up and tied up by Alicia and Grandma Sanchez—to his great embarrassment, undressed and put into the best bed in the house by Badger and told that he might sit up, still too weak to do anything more strenuous than to cuss the sergeant because he couldn't *get* up. Rancho Sanchez buzzed like a beehive now. Charley Jones lay in the patio, tied hand and foot as only a *vaquero* could tie a man, growling profanity and threats at anyone who ventured near him.

Badger overheard the man use foul language to one of the women, whereupon the big Ranger strode out there, and told him, "Hobble your damned lip, Jones, or so help me—I'll gag you with a green hide!"

Before the raider thought of something to say, little Tomas ran up and tugged at Badger's sleeve. "Oh, mister! My papa says men are coming on the trail!"

Godamighty! thought the sergeant. *More bandits!*

He hurried to Felipe in the front room and they watched a bunch of horsemen come loping down the trail in the moonlight. The *Tejano* gripped the double-barreled shotgun loaded with buckshot, which he hadn't fired. Badger's hand closed on his six-shooter.

"Don't open the door," he growled. "I'll talk to 'em through the window. If they don't sound right, we ain't a-takin' no chances. Wait for me to start it, then blow 'em to hell!"

The riders dashed up and slid their horses to a halt in the yard. "Hello, in there!" yelled a big voice. "Where's everybody?"

Stony Smith!

Having played the part of an outlaw for so long, Badger did it convincingly now. "What d'you want, Stony?"

"We're a-huntin' bandits, dead or alive!"

"We've got 'em both," answered the Ranger. "Tell your men to ride back to the line of the brush and *stay in their saddles,* then you can come in."

The vigilantes trotted away and the old cowman clumped into the room. He bristled with energy and excitement and boiled with curiosity, but Badger and Felipe wouldn't answer his questions. They took him straight to Blizzard's bed.

"What in hell happened to you?" he demanded. "You're plumb pale and peak-ed."

"Fell off'n a chair and busted a rib," answered the lieutenant feebly. "What you got on the fire, Stony?"

"Is that all you fellas can say to a man?" growled the old-timer. "Anyhow, yesterday I got a tip that a bunch of bandits would be raidin' down thisaway today and we set out this mornin' to cut their trail. Missed 'em somehow or other. Comin' back this evenin' after dark we met up with a couple of jaspers a-ridin' hellbent towards Laredo. One of 'em is all right, but the other'n is a-hangin' on to keep from fallin' off and he allows he's got a bullet through the bellows. They swear that raiders have got you-all corraled down here and that they managed to bust out and are goin' for help. Said they was cowhunters and put up at Sanchez for the night. We told the sound one to take his pardner on to a doctor and we'd come here. Pretty soon we met two more boys shot up bad and they tell us that they had a fight with a bunch of bandits that tried to lift their horses. A little farther along we find a dead man in the trail and he don't tell us nothin' at all. What in hell happened down here?"

Blizzard nodded to Badger. "Tell him. Better tell him the truth, I reckon."

The young sergeant told him the precise truth in every detail, and wound up, "—so we've got four dead bandits under a tree back yander and a live one in the patio. Damned if I know what we'll do with 'em. The weather is too hot and the ground is too hard for *me* to dig graves for bandits. Of course, the live one ain't needin' a grave, *yet.*"

Old Stony Smith scowled at Badger as if he'd like to throttle him. "D'you mean to set there barefaced and tell me that them jaspers we met on the trail was bandits and they plumb bamboozled me and my boys? *Do you?*"

The big Ranger chuckled, shrugged, and told him, "You'd oughta know, mister. What happens to you vigilantes don't bother me none."

The old-timer swore, and declared, "I'll take them bandits you've got, dead and alive. I'll carry 'em around the country and show 'em to some folks that need to see bandits thataway."

Blizzard's voice was weak, but, nevertheless, it had a cutting edge. "What sort of an outfit are you runnin'? A dead man's circus?"

"That's *my* business!" roared Smith. "I'll have you know that I'm a officer—Deppity Sheriff."

"Hell of an officer you are!" said the lieutenant frigidly. "Hangin' men right and left without a trial and showin' 'em off after they're dead. But, take 'em and get away from here. I'm a-needin' my rest."

Stony Smith was so mad he couldn't talk. When he got up to leave, Blizzard told him, "I want you to know one thing for certain. Felipe Sanchez and his people are our friends now. His wife risked her life and got nicked by a bullet a-takin' care of me. I understand that his old man left him a league and a labor* of land, five thousand head of cattle and five hundred horses, and he's been robbed one way and another until he ain't got half that much—land or stock. While you're a-showin' off your dead men, just pass the word along that we're Felipe's friends. You might save *some* folks some trouble thataway."

"What're you talkin' about?" growled Stony. "It's bandits that have robbed Sanchez."

"Bandits can't steal his land and pack it across the Rio," retorted Blizzard. "Your crooked courts and law-abidin' citizens done that. Far's Felipe is concerned, me and Badger will take care of the bandits. You're an officer. *You* take care of the *good citizens.*"

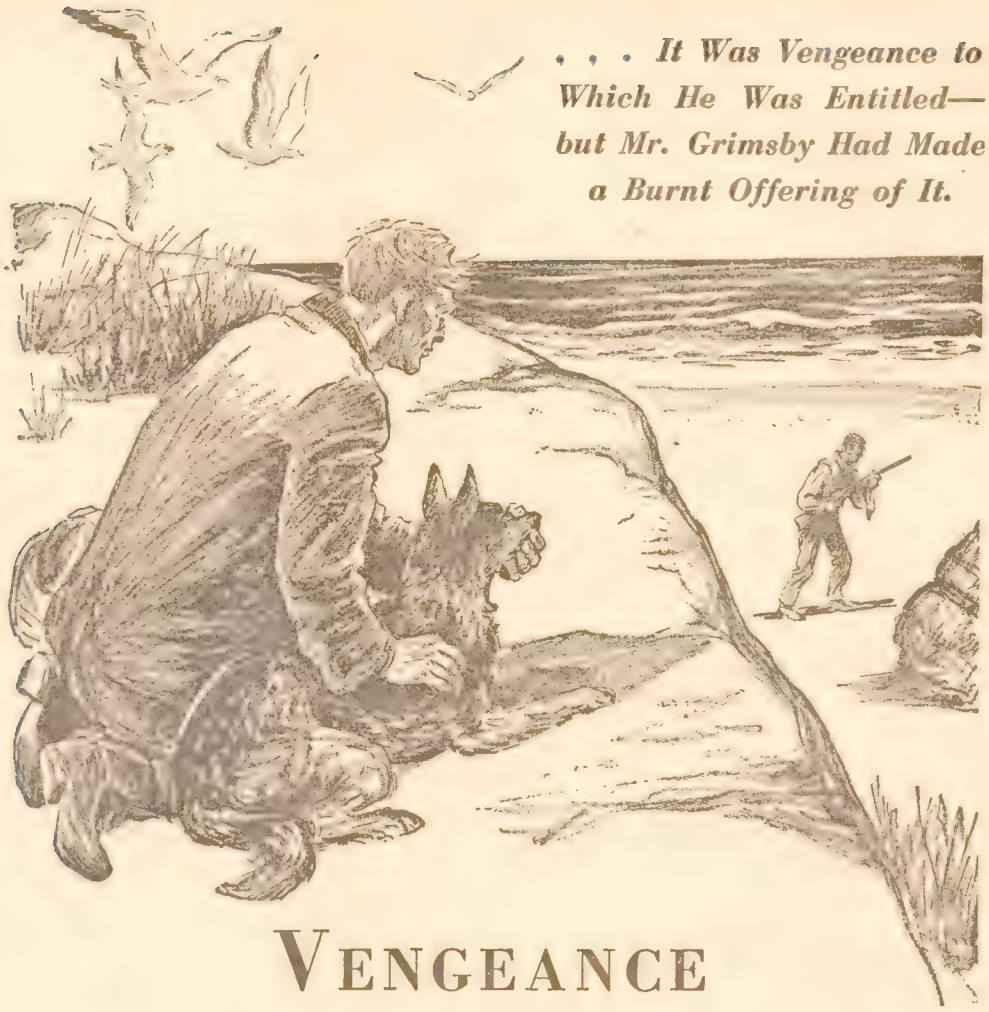
The old cowman's attitude suddenly changed. "I see what you mean, Blizzard, and you're dead right. I've been knowin' this Sanchez tribe from Grandpa Timoteo on down to Felipe and they've always been damned fine folks. You're an aggravatin' scalawag, Wilson, but I still wish you and your pardner would take that job I offered you."

"Damned if I'll work for a deputy sheriff," growled Badger.

"Me neither," declared Blizzard.

* Old Spanish measurements. A league, 4,428 acres. A labor, 177 acres.

(*Part II in the next* SHORT STORIES)



. . . It Was Vengeance to Which He Was Entitled—but Mr. Grimsby Had Made a Burnt Offering of It.

VENGEANCE

By MURRAY LEINSTER

WHILE he was in prison, Mr. Grimsby made a burnt offering. He swore a mighty oath unto the Lord that if the Lord would get him out of the penitentiary, he would forego revenge upon Mort Bowen, by whose doing he had been imprisoned. It was a one-sided bargain. Mr. Grimsby's right to vengeance was unquestionable. But he would have bargained anything at all for freedom. So one stifling-hot afternoon in his cell, with flies buzzing in his ears and the stone corridors ringing resonantly with what should have been silence, Mr. Grimsby got down on his knees and desperately made his offer. If the Lord would free him, he would not take revenge. He swore it in passionate sincerity. It was all he had left—the right to avenge himself upon his enemy. But if the Lord would only free him, he would make a burnt offering of his vengeance. He would not raise his hand against the man who had wronged him, nor the woman who had shared in that wrong. Mr. Grimsby trembled in the earnestness of his entreaty.

And the prison doors were opened.

SO there was sea; gray sea with fretfully tossing waves beneath a morose grayish sky. To westward there was no limit to the water. To the eastward the mainland showed

bold mountains and serrated peaks, but it was too far away for the surf to be visible. Overhead, seabirds soared by millions and filled the air with their clamoring. The island was a bird-sanctuary, and Mr. Grimsby was now its guardian. The job had been given him practically with his pardon, through the weary efforts of the district attorney who had discovered Mr. Grimsby's innocence of the crime for which he had been imprisoned. And Mr. Grimsby was utterly happy.

He was a little wisp of a man, with faded blue eyes and graying hair. He was clad in dungarees, with heavy boots on his feet and an oilskin hat on his head. Near him, a dog dug agitatedly in six-inch soil, his tail wagging joyously. Already the dog adored Mr. Grimsby. And there were no walls about him. He could look away and away until his eyes grew wearied with looking, and there was no barrier to his vision. There was a little shack on the island and he could enter or leave it at will. There was no person on earth with authority to hinder his comings or goings. He was free. Which was bliss.

"Get along, Frisco!" said Mr. Grimsby happily to the dog. "You ain't goin' to find anything there!"

The dog ceased to dig and came to him. He watched Mr. Grimsby's face and danced a little. Then he turned his head sidewise and delicately gripped the stick in Mr. Grimsby's hand. He suddenly lay back on his haunches and tugged, grinning up at the man.

"Dumb fool dog!" said Mr. Grimsby fondly. He tugged back on the stick. Little, graying man and brown-and-white dog, they tusseled all alone upon a rocky island with seabirds squawking overhead, and all the sea empty about them.

It was quite absurd, but a very happy absurdity. Mr. Grimsby took a deep breath, presently, and let go of the stick. The dog scuttled away, carrying it. Then he marched about, waving the stick in his jaws in what he plainly considered a tantalizing manner. Mr. Grimsby beamed at him. But—

"Nope," said Mr. Grimsby. "No more, now. It's gettin' late. We're goin' to go get our supper, Frisco. Come along!"

He started off for the shanty near the one beach where landing was humanly possible. The dog dropped the stick and trotted with him. The dog was Mr. Grimsby's assistant as guardian of the island.

The sun sank low. Birds flew in from the sea. Shadows gathered at the corners of the horizon. Mr. Grimsby let his eyes roam again over the waste of tossing waters. There was an ecstasy in looking far and far away, with no walls anywhere between. He saw a dot upon the sea.

"Hm—" said Mr. Grimsby to the dog. "There's a boat yonder. He won't be comin' here, though. We won't see nobody for a week yet." Then he said with conscious professionalism. "Looks like nasty weather for a little boat tonight, Frisco."

Boats did not come to the bird sanctuary except to bring supplies. They had no reason to. Man and dog went into the shanty. Mr. Grimsby cooked. The two of them dined. Later—much later—Mr. Grimsby made ready for bed. The stove made irregular puffing noises from the rising wind. Weather was definitely making up. The surf was a great deal louder. But Mr. Grimsby paid no heed. Before he lay down to sleep, though, he devoutly reassured the Lord that he would keep his bargain. Since he had been got out of the penitentiary, he would never raise his hand against Mort Bowen or the woman who had shared in the offense against him. It was his way of expressing gratitude, and it might have seemed superfluous. But it wasn't.

Because, as Mr. Grimsby slept, and while the wind boomed more loudly and the surf roared more angrily, the boat he had seen before sunset made a precarious landing in the darkness, and stove a hole in its bottom, and its single occupant raged horribly in the blackness of the night. He had had a fair store of food and drink in the boat, but practically all of it was lost. He did, though, salvage a shotgun and shells. It seemed that they were more important to him than even food.

When morning broke the seas were still high, but the wind had lessened a little. Smoke billowed out of the shanty chimney. Presently Mr. Grimsby and the dog came out. They started briskly on their morning round.

They saw the smashed boat from a cliff-top a half-mile away, and Mr. Grimsby peered anxiously for some sign of its oc-

cupants. There was none. Then Mr. Grimsby clambered precariously down to the water's edge. He made an urgent, dangerous search for a possible dead man or men, but found nobody.

The mystery was not solved until he went back to the shanty. Then he saw the smoke of a fresh fire, and knew that there was someone else on the island who had found the shack in his absence and now dried and warmed himself after a dreary night and a narrow escape from drowning. Mr. Grimsby hurried to meet his guest, beaming. Freedom was enough for the Lord to have given him for his sacrifice of vengeance against Mort Bowen and the woman. But someone to talk to comfortably for a whole week before the next fishery-inspection boat came by. Mr. Grimsby felt an enormous happiness flowing all through his veins.

He conscientiously knocked off the thin mud from his boots against the bottom doorstep. He climbed the stairs and opened the door and stepped in, his faded eyes shining. And then he stopped short.

It was, he knew, the Lord's doing. It could be nothing else. And he had made a burnt offering of the vengeance to which he was entitled. But Mr. Grimsby's face went ashen-white and then a very terribly gray.

His faded blue eyes burned like flames. He shook all over, so horribly that he had to grope for the doorframe to steady himself by. Because the man who faced him with his hand on a shotgun was Mort Bowen.

Mr. Grimsby felt his whole body trembling with his passion. A red mist came before his eyes. It did not in the least occur to him to be afraid. One who has legitimate cause for vengeance does not feel fear. Mr. Grimsby lusted for the life of the startled, uneasily grinning man before him as a man dying of thirst craves water.

But a cold, detached part of his brain reminded him that he had sworn an oath unto the Lord, and the Lord had done His part. Mr. Grimsby was here, instead of the penitentiary. He was free.

His eyes cleared partly of the blood-mist, and he saw Mort Bowen clearly. The brown-and-white dog growled.

"I didn't expect—" said Mr. Grimsby in a queerly still voice, "I didn't expect to see you here, Mort. I'd ought to kill you. I got the right to."

Mort brought the shotgun to bear.

"You ain't killin' nobody," he said. "If there's any killin' done, I'm doin' it!—I heard you was out."

Mr. Grimsby panted. Then he said:

"You were with Selma. It was because you got scared I'd find out an kill you both that you fixed it so's I'd get blamed for somethin' you done. I promised the Lord I wouldn't kill you, Mort. I don't want to break my promise. But you get away from here quick or I won't answer for it!"

Mort Bowen had Mr. Grimsby's life at his fingertips. A pressure on the shotgun trigger would end Mr. Grimsby's life in a blast of flame and flying lead. But he said:

"When is somebody comin' so I can get away? My boat's smashed!"

Mr. Grimsby choked. Then he said in a strange calm:

"I'm guardian of this here bird sanctuary now. I' been here just three weeks. They gave me the job when they pardoned me. The boat that brought me here's gone back. The one that's up north is goin' to stop by in six more days. It'll take you away. Meanwhile you got to keep outa my sight or I'll be killin' you!"

He turned and went away from the shanty. He walked blindly, filled with a passion so terrible that it was agony. The dog went with him.

WAVES beat on the island with diminishing violence. The wind continued to blow, but with decreasing force. At midday there was a break in the clouds and the sun shone on a great patch of water. But Mr. Grimsby walked desperately upon the island's cliffs, the brown-and-white dog following him puzzledly. The time came for their midday meal, and Mr. Grimsby made no move to go back to his house. The afternoon passed, and he was in no calmer frame of mind. Mort Bowen had seemed his friend, once, and Mr. Grimsby was unsuspecting. He'd had Mort share his home as a boarder, and Mort abused his trust. Finally, whether because he was frightened at his own guilt or contemptuously impatient of Mr. Grimsby's mere existence, he'd got rid of the little man. It was a deft villiany by which Mr. Grimsby fell afoul

of the law, and Mort and Mr. Grimsby's wife had doomed him by seemingly reluctant admissions on her part, and sworn testimony by Mort. He'd gone to the penitentiary. Surely a man had the right to vengeance for a crime like that! But Mr. Grimsby had bartered away his right for freedom.

It was close to dark when he re-approached the shanty. Mort came out to meet him. He carried his shotgun in his hand.

"Well?" he said, grinning a little.

"I come back," said Mr. Grimsby, trembling with the passion that filled him, "to get some blankets an' grub. I can't stay in the house with you, Mort, an' not kill you. An' I promised not to. So I got to keep clear o' you."

The clouds had broken away at the west, now, and there was a bright red-gold radiance on all the island and the shore and even on Mr. Grimsby. He was very pale, and terribly resolute.

"I'll leave you the house," said Mr. Grimsby in a still, tense voice. "I'll camp out till the fish'ry-inspection boat gets here. You'll be goin' away on it—an' keep away from me till it comes!"

THE dog, his nose stretched forward, sniffed the scent of Mort Bowen from his place beside his master. Mort shifted the shotgun from hand to hand as he debated.

"The fellas on that boat know you, huh?" he asked. "You' goin' to tell 'em what a scoundrel I am, huh?"

"I never seen 'em," said Mr. Grimsby. "The other boat brought me here." Then he added desperately, "Stan' aside, Mort! If I get close to you, I'm apt—"

Mort Bowen nodded his head.

"Since the fellas on the boat don't know you," he said softly, "it don't matter what you're apt to do. Supposin' I filled you full o' lead and told 'em I was you when they come?"

Mr. Grimsby wavered on his feet from the sheer anguish of his hate.

"I promised not to lift my han' to you," he repeated, his voice thin and high. "Get outa my way so's I can get blankets an' grub!"

Mort did not move. He waited, grinning uneasily, the shotgun ready. Mr. Grimsby would have actually to brush against him in order to enter the house. And he did not dare.

He panted, as his enemy waited for him to approach. He made a sound like a sob. Then he turned and stumbled away, his hands closing and unclosing. The dog followed unhappily. When Mr. Grimsby reached the high ground above the shanty, the dog uneasily nuzzled his hand. The yearning touch did something. Mr. Grimsby said thickly:

"I swore unto the Lord—an' He let me outa prison. I swore again las' night. I—I got to keep my word. But—" Then he said more thickly still, "We'll set three fires, Frisco. I got to keep clear o' him!"

The keeper of a bird-sanctuary has as his task the protection of his charges from their natural enemies, plus men who might rob the nests and slay the birds for food. Protected birds can no longer be sold in quantity, and the birds on this island did not need to be guarded against armed parties who would kill them by thousands, but against individuals who might kill them by dozens. One man was enough for the purpose. Yet emergencies might arise, and there was no radio on the island. Instead, there was merely the makeshift understanding that three fires by night or three smokes by day on the bird-sanctuary island would be notice to the mainland of an emergency. There was no regular watch kept for the signal—but the likelihood of an emergency would be remote.

In Mr. Grimsby's view, the emergency had arisen. Mort Bowen was the one man on earth whom he, Mr. Grimsby, had the right to kill. That right had been bartered away, but Mort would not understand it. He was afraid, and with reason. Mr. Grimsby himself was in deadly fear of his own justified rage. If he and Mort were left alone upon this island for six more days, Mr. Grimsby doubted his ability to keep his oath.

So he lighted three fires.

THE sun had set, but the long Inland Passage twilight remained. The first fire began as a monstrous billowing of smoke on the headland above the shanty. In the twilight there seemed but little flame, and from some parts of the mainland, at least, the smoke-column would be invisible against the

cloud-filled western sky. The second fire rose a quarter-mile away. The third was farther still. They burned smokily in the fading light. They sent up huge columns of vapor. But they were not really efficient signalling devices, because of the time of day.

As Mr. Grimsby built up the last of them, Mort Bowen saw the first. It was too big a blaze to be intended for camping. He wondered at it, at first. But he had been examining all of Mr. Grimsby's papers and instructions since the possibility of substituting himself for Mr. Grimsby had occurred to him. Suddenly, he remembered the makeshift arrangement for signal-fires.

He went raging up the steep trail, dragging his shotgun. The first fire was untended, and he saw the two others. He went ashen-white and attacked the first fire frenziedly, kicking its embers aside. He left it smoking feebly and pounded to the second. He scattered it furiously. Panting, he ran to the third. His breath was a hoarse honking noise when he reached it. Mr. Grimsby waited beside it with clenched hands.

MORT flung up the shotgun and fired both barrels at the first sight of him, before even he reached and assailed the blaze. It was partly pure fury, and fear. But he was winded and exhausted from running, and he shook with rage besides. He missed with both barrels.

Mr. Grimsby stirred, as if to go raging to meet him. But he did not. He walked off into the darkness beyond the firelight as Mort kicked the fire into extinction, gasping blasphemies the while. Beyond the firelight he fought his own terrible emotions. He won. Presently he said with a strained calmness to the panting man:

"I said I wouldn't lift my hand to you, Mort. I promised it, unto the Lord. But the Lord is sure tryin' me. I could come right now an' kill you while your gun ain't loaded."

Mort Bowen pantingly reloaded his weapon, staring about him. But Mr. Grimsby went away. His vitals were knotted in a tight ball by the passion within him. He walked in anguish for a time. But his resolution held.

When the long twilight ended and the night was black with overhanging clouds, Mr. Grimsby built three more fires. Their flames mounted skyward in a splendid brilliance.

Mort got to the first one within five minutes after it reached its peak. He got to the second one twenty minutes later. And he screamed curses at the darkness about him while he stamped out the third.

Mr. Grimsby started three more toward dawn, when the fishing-boats would be putting out from shore, over on the mainland. But Mort got to them, too.

WHEN the sun rose, Mr. Grimsby's face was drawn and pale. He looked out over the sea and saw it so deep a blue that it was almost purple. The sky was clear now, too, and the wind that blew was bracing and alive. The dog slept curled up by his side. The discordant babble of the birds on the island rose to a clamor which had seemed music. The deep-toned murmur of the surf was organlike. But Mr. Grimsby, for the first time, found no zest in his freedom.

He stirred, and the dog woke and was instantly on his feet, his tail wagging. He licked Mr. Grimsby's hand, and then yawned and stretched elaborately while he waited to see what his master would do.

"I guess," said Mr. Grimsby heavily, "that Mort's got into some kinda trouble over on the mainland, an' that's why he don't want me to signal for somebody to come take him off. Maybe—maybe—" Then he said, "No. The Lord wouldn't figure I'd oughta help get him free. The Lord's tryin' me, but He wouldn't ask me that!"

A cloud of seabirds rose with startled squawkings, a hundred yards away. Mr. Grimsby looked. The dog pricked up his ears. He trotted away to see what was the matter. He vanished.

An instant later he barked furiously. Then there was the roar of a shotgun. The dog yelped agonizedly. Mr. Grimsby was on his feet, a madman on the instant. But he called hoarsely, "Frisco! Frisco!" even as he ran.

He saw the dog running toward him, limping, his ears back, snarling behind him. Mr. Grimsby bent to gather up the dog—and the shotgun roared again and a mass of flying pellets went through the space where his body had been.

Mr. Grimsby looked up from where the dog raged hysterically in his grasp. Frisco writhed about to bark and snarl simultaneously at the man with the smoking shotgun.

Without a word, Mr. Grimsby rose and started for his enemy. He was a wisp of a man, but he was death incarnate as he started for Mort Bowen. The shotgun clicked. Empty. With a gasp, Mort Bowen ran. As he ran, he labored frantically to reload.

Mr. Grimsby stopped. He went back to the dog. He moved like an automaton. He examined the squirming animal. A few pellets only had broken the skin and were doubtless lodged inside.

"You come along," said Mr. Grimsby steadily. "You carry that leg till we get where I can get those shots out. Then I'll get to work on Mort."

HE LED the way off. Once, he sighted Mort. His enemy had reloaded the gun and now looked about him fearfully. But that was the remainder of the panic he had felt when Mr. Grimsby went for him and his gun would not fire. Presently he would remember that in even an empty shotgun he possessed a deadly club, and in any case there is always the courage of desperation. But it is a poor substitute for a better grade of bravery.

Mr. Grimsby found a safe place and tended the dog. There were six pellets in one hind-leg. Three of them came out readily, though Frisco licked Mr. Grimsby's hand frantically in protest as he worked them out. The little man soothed him, and the dog squirmingly submitted to the more drastic methods needed for two more. The last, Mr. Grimsby knew, would require a deep cut to extract it. He left it alone. When he released the dog, Frisco limped away, and then came back to nuzzle his hand, and then settled down to lick his wounds elaborately.

Mr. Grimsby brooded.

"I woulda killed him then," he told the dog. "Promise or no promise, I woulda killed him. I guess there's been lots of men promised they'd do right if He got 'em outa prison an' He knows how it is, so He helped me that once—"

The dog wagged and went back to the licking of his wounds. Mr. Grimsby meditated somberly.

At three in the afternoon a fire started, and Mort Bowen put it out. Mr. Grimsby did not light the other two. He tried again later, where he thought they would be difficult for Mort to get to. But it was equally difficult to get fuel to such places, and before he could get a second fire going the first was scattered embers.

Well after dark, three fires burst into flame at almost the same instant at three separate spots on the island. Mr. Grimsby had arranged for them to smoulder for some time before they blazed up.

Mort Bowen put them out.

Mr. Grimsby somberly lay down to rest. He could not sleep. The injury to his dog had created a new and fresh and terrible rage in him. But he sternly repressed it. Still, he could not sleep.

In the still hours he heard a stone turn. The dog was instantly awake and growling. Mr. Grimsby put his hand over his muzzle and listened. He heard panting breaths.

"Mort," he said sternly into the darkness, "I ain't tried to harm you. You leave me alone. If you're in trouble somewheres, that ain't my business. Get down to the house an' stay there!"

Silence. Stillness. Ear-cracking stillness, save for the dull rumble of the surf and the perpetual sleepy noises of the nesting-spaces even during the night. Then another noise.

"Come along, Frisco," said Mr. Grimsby steadily.

He moved away. He knew the island. It was broken and rough and covered with minor peaks and pinnacles, and there were patches of brushwood here and there and nesting-places everywhere. He moved assuredly, the dog with him. But suddenly, behind, there was an outburst of squawkings. Mort Bowen had blundered into a nest-area, and the birds fluttered crazily at the disturbance.

"Huntin' me, now," said Mr. Grimsby evenly.

Within an hour, a fire blazed up. While Mort stamped it to nothingness, Mr. Grimsby and the dog went to the shack. Mr. Grimsby took food and a blanket for himself. He took matches. He took his own shotgun and all the shells that he could find. He was gone before Mort came back

—in fact, he saw Mort stamping out remaining embers and looking desperately for the other fires he expected to appear.

The shotgun seemed almost alive in Mr. Grimsby's grasp, and his eyes burned, but he went on doggedly into the darkness. At the far end of the island he said earnestly to the star-studded sky:

"Lord, I took the gun so's maybe it'd scare him an' make him leave me alone. But I know I ain't trustworthy, Lord. An' this is to prove I do mean to keep the vow I made unto Thee."

He threw the shotgun from a cliff-top, and the shells after it. He was defenseless again.

FOR one day Mr. Grimsby was at peace. The dog's leg stiffened a little, but by nightfall of the third day of Mort's presence on the island, he moved about readily. He carried the injured leg most of the time, but every so often he forgot and touched it to the ground. Which was evidence that it was not continually painful. Mr. Grimsby took heart. He looked out over the sea. He could watch the seabirds in their millions and he could look benevolently upon the nests and nestlings.

He did not see Mort at all. He estimated that Mort had discovered the disappearance of the other shotgun—it was inevitable—and would remain in hiding, fearful of the vengeance Mr. Grimsby had bartered away.

At nightfall Mr. Grimsby built a small fire. It was carefully placed so that its light would not be visible at a distance, and Mr. Grimsby cooked for himself and the dog over it. He was quite happy again. He talked comfortingly to the dog, and the dog watched him with bright, adoring eyes.

"Yes, sir!" said Mr. Grimsby, his spirits soaring in the assurance of peace. "You' wonderin' why we keep campin' out, Frisco? Don't you bother! We ain't goin' to be campin' out much longer! Presently we're goin' to be back home again an' you'll have your own rug to sleep on agian."

The dog rose and gazed into the darkness. He growled a little, then barked furiously.

A man cursed somewhere because he was discovered, and Mr. Grimsby and the dog went away into the night while Mort scrambled ferociously toward the dim glow of a hidden fire.

At daybreak Mr. Grimsby saw Mort again. Somehow haggard, and somehow desperate even at a distance, he doggedly hunted the island over. He carried his shotgun ready, and he peered this way and that with an hysterical resolution. Mr. Grimsby watched him with set lips and held the dog's muzzle so he could not bark defiance.

At eleven he saw Mort yet again, still desperately searching the island over. At two, the little man investigated his camping-place of the night before, and found that Mort had flung his blanket and all his food upon the dying blaze, and they were consumed. At four o'clock he saw Mort a long way off, still hunting.

At sunset, Mr. Grimsby built one small fire and waited for Mort to come to it. He came stumbling and frantically ready to do murder or—extraordinarily—offer battle. He cursed horribly as he put out the fire. And Mr. Grimsby called down from a high place above him.

"Mort!"

Mort turned a ravaged face upward, his shotgun ready.

"What d'you want to kill me for?" demanded Mr. Grimsby sternly. "I ain't harmed you. I promised the Lord I wouldn't."

Mort searched fiercely for the source of his voice. Mr. Grimsby let himself be seen. Instantly, Mort fired and then attacked the hillside in a frenzy, to reach Mr. Grimsby.

But Mr. Grimsby was not there when he reached the top. He heard Mort shouting hoarsely behind him as he went back to the shanty and got more food for himself and the dog.

He took his oilskins, too, because the weather threatened again. That night he dozed in the shelter of a rocky overhang with the dog curled under the skirts of his coat for protection against a drizzling rain.

At ten next morning Mort was still raging over the island, shouting hoarsely for Mr. Grimsby to come and fight him. Even far away, he seemed close to madness. Mr. Grimsby found a place from which he could not be approached and somberly waited out the day. Then, twice during the night he heard Mort's voice, bellowing blasphemous defiances. He sounded more than a little insane.

At eleven next morning Mr. Grimsby saw

the fishery-inspection steamer very far away toward the horizon. He knew that it was moving toward the island. He began to make his way cautiously to where he could greet its landing-boat. The dog limped hardly at all, now, and Mr. Grimsby was filled with a sensation of enormous relief. If Mort did not go down to meet the small boat from the steamer, men would come ashore to hunt for the island's guardian. If Mort did not kill Mr. Grimsby before they landed, it would do him no good to kill him at all. He would not have three weeks in which to tear down the shanty and build some sort of boat in which to voyage untraceably away before the boat whose crewmen knew Mr. Grimsby could return.

These next few hours, then, were the only ones in which Mr. Grimsby would be in danger. So he moved with very great care.

But his care was useless. Even the dog was startled when they came upon Mort. With a terrifying cunning he had found the one place from which he could see every avenue by which the landing-place end of the island could be approached. He had ensconced himself there with his shotgun and shells. He waited for Mr. Grimsby to kill him. And Mr. Grimsby was only twenty feet away when he discovered it.

BUT Mort did not stir. His face was lined and sunken in. His hands were thin as claws. He had been six days on the island, and from twilight of the first night he had either watched unremittingly for signal-fires by which Mr. Grimsby might summon help from the mainland, or else had as unremittingly hunted for Mr. Grimsby to kill him. He had been five days and nights without sleep.

So now he slept, his shotgun handy and his shells in readiness. Where he lay in wait for Mr. Grimsby, exhaustion had overtaken him. Had he stayed awake, Mr. Grimsby would have been killed before he had the least suspicion of Mort's nearness. But now he lay with his head tumbled forward on a rock which was to have been the rest for his gun, and he looked so pitiably spent that even Mr. Grimsby was almost sorry for him.

The dog growled, but Mr. Grimsby made a gesture which the dog somehow understood. Mr. Grimsby went up to him and took away the shotgun and the shells. He looked down at the exhausted figure, and then at his own hands. He flexed his fingers almost curiously, as if amazed that they did not try to grasp at Mort's throat.

Then he went on down to the landing-place, and led men from the fishery-inspection boat up to get Mort. He was very much at peace, now, but he felt a vague, remaining doubt of himself. He did not wish to touch his enemy. He showed the sleeping figure to three men from the steamer.

"That's him," said Mr. Grimsby. "His name's Mort Bowen. He's been tryin' to kill me for six days, now. He got all wore out workin' at it. I figure he must be in some kinda trouble on the mainland, workin' so hard to kill me so's he could take my place."

"Mort Bowen?" said one of the three. "That's the fella they've been looking for all week! Radio had something about it. He killed a woman he was living with, and they're hunting him hard!"

They picked up Mort Bowen. He did not wake. Six days and nights without sleep is too much.

Presently Mr. Grimsby watched the fishery boat steam away. All about him there was sea on which the sun shone warmly. Above him, seabirds by millions flapped and soared and squawked. He could look forever to the westward, and to the east the mainland was very far away. The dog licked meditatively at his injured leg beside him. Mr. Grimsby was free, even of the need to think again of the vengeance he had bartered away. But he stood uneasily in the sunlight. The dog looked up at his movement, but Mr. Grimsby did not notice.

"Lord," said Mr. Grimsby uncomfortably, "I—just come to see something. I—been kinda proud, Lord. I made a vow when I was in prison that I wouldn't lift my hand to Mort Bowen if You got me out. An' You did, an' I thought I had to keep my bargain. But I see now, Lord, that it wasn't no bargain. You just done it out of Your good will. I—I appreciate it, Lord. An' I—I didn't mean to be proud when I offered what I did." He hesitated, and said apologetically, "I just forgot, Lord, that You'd said that vengeance was Thine."

Even Chiefs of South Sea Islands Sometimes Seem to Have Girl Trouble

Pearls For Orni Buckson

By CHARLES YERKOW

WITH easy strokes on the oars, despite his graying hair and that kink bothering his back these past two months, Orni Buckson rowed the dory ashore at Taminig Island, pulled her up on the blinding hot beach, and then stood there a moment to rest and gaze seaward at his anchored pearling lugger. Beyond the counter of the trim ship, he could see the faint outlines of the hills on Niga Island to the north, while to the left bobbed the seven luggers of Captain Gray, Orni's competitor.

Orni walked slowly up the beach toward Tobe's pub while he let his mind go back on board the lugger where he knew young Billy Crusse, his mate, and Megu with the New Guinea boys, were all restlessly awaiting his return. Megu, true to his fighting *Soholi* blood, had wanted to come along, but Orni had decided to do the job alone.

At sight of the trader storage sheds Orni

slowed down and a little sadness crept into his mind. If he didn't find out today where Chief Adi was—well, he'd have to go back to cargo and forget pearling. It was a strange quirk of nature that crew and owner had to eat even here among the lost pearling islands of the Arafura Sea. Things would've been all right at that, but not when your competitor owns seven luggers to your one.

As he walked past the sheds toward the grove and the thatch-roofed houses of the village, Orni wondered what his luck would be.

Chief Adi was the one diver who knew the best pearling grounds; he could save them, or any pearler, a good deal of time fishing the coast off New Guinea or the islands farther out along the reefs. Every lugger owner was looking for Chief Adi, but the catch was that the native diver had run off some place and had hidden himself. And it took more than white man's ingenuity and cunning to discover the man's reason for hiding out, not to mention the impossibility of locating him. Why the devil would Adi run off just when the weather was shaping up for a good pearling season? It didn't make sense, and Orni scowled as he tramped along the pathway toward Tobe's pub.

Tobe was a big fat man, slow in everything he did, and Orni found him seated in the musty front room, one elbow on the table, a fly-swatter in his other hand ready to put an end to two fat flies guzzling the sweat off the half-full glass of ale. Orni's loud greeting put the flies to flight; Tobe pursed his lips and flung the swatter at the table, said, "You always come at the wrong time."

ORNI chuckled and pulled a wicker chair closer to Tobe; while he was seating himself, the pub owner brought a glass of cold ale and set it before the pearler. After Orni downed half the glass, Tobe sat down and asked, "Are you still looking for Chief Adi?"

Orni's brows knotted at the question and at Tobe's tone; that voice said that no one could find the native, and Orni felt an irritation creeping up inside him—he had to find Adi pronto and no slack about it!

"I didn't think of it before, Tobe," Orni said, "but it came to me last night while I was comfortably stretched on my bunk and breathing the cool breeze of the sea—"

"Stow that gaff!" Tobe said dourly. "Last night was the hottest and there wasn't a flick of air moving. You and your imagination! Just rile a man, that's what!" He reached for the fly-swatter. "Go on, tell me what you were thinking—pearls, no doubt?"

Orni laughed. "What else is there to think about? You yourself are thinking about pearls."

"Sure, sure. Only one thing holding me back. Can't pearl without a ship!"

Orni took off his cap and laid it on the table, then sipped a bit of ale to wet his dry throat. He eyed Tobe closely. "You tried to buy one of Captain Gray's ships, but shrewd as that shark is, he wouldn't sell. Then you came to me, and I couldn't sell you my only ship and my only gear."

Orni paused, and Tobe looked up expectantly.

"Now, then," Orni went on, his leathery face breaking into a smile, "I figured it out last night. Chief Adi runs out, but before he runs he has a talk with you, Tobe—you said so yourself. Then, you want to get a ship and some diving gear. Ahoy, mate! I tells myself Tobe knows where Adi is hiding out, and maybe Tobe knows why Adi is hiding!" Orni sat straight up and chuckled louder, but just then his back kinked and the pain stab brought him up silent. "Now, am I right, Tobe?" he asked quietly.

Tobe said something under his breath, then, "Doesn't look like I'll get a ship, and I'd rather see you and Adi together instead of letting that cheat Jenks and his boss Cap'n Gray get him."

Orni's eyes gleamed. "Sure, Tobe. You remember all the good turns I did for you. Where's Adi? Is he gone back to his village?"

Tobe shook his head. "Naw—he's gone over to Niga Island. He's just—"

"Doing a little side pearling?"

Tobe again shook his head. "Nope. Just resting, taking it easy. He won't go out pearling because if he's seen, they"—Tobe suddenly cut his words and glanced toward the screen door.

Orni turned his head to look. What he saw was a young native girl in a white

mission-presented blouse and flowered skirt. She was standing outside and beckoning to Tobe.

Tobe snorted and waved his beefy arm at the girl. Instead of going away, the girl beckoned to him again.

Orni clucked his tongue and gave the pub owner a reproachful look. *"Tch, tch.* I'm surprised at you, Tobe."

With a weary sigh, Tobe got up. "Iloli will get me in a jam one of these days." He went to the door. "Go 'way," he said to the native girl. "Fella Chief Adi belong you he no here this place! Go 'way!"

Orni saw the girl take several steps back, but he also saw her eyes flame with thoughts of mischief. When Tobe returned and sat down, Orni remarked, "Your pidgin isn't much good, is it? What you should've said is—"

"She got my meaning," Tobe cut in.

"What's she want?"

"Looking for Chief Adi."

"Oh-ho!" Orni exclaimed. "She's sweet on him, huh?"

The pub owner scowled. "I don't care who she's sweet on, so long as she stops pestering me. If Doughan, the District Officer, even catches her in my place he'll—"

"He'll be more than mad," Orni said and chuckled at his friend's discomfort. "Now, you were saying that Chief Adi is over on Niga Island. What are the chances of his going pearling with me?"

The pub owner shook his head. "I told you all I can tell you. Maybe I shouldn't have told you even that much." With that he lapsed into silence.

ORNI lifted his ale, but in that instant his eyes caught sight of Iloli outside and he slowly lowered the glass. She was still standing rooted to the spot outside the pub, her black eyes blazing mad and her mouth pouting with a stubborn smile. Orni couldn't help but wonder if perhaps Tobe had misunderstood the girl, if perhaps she knew where Chief Adi was hiding. He was on Niga, of course, but maybe Iloli knew exactly where to look for him. It could be, he reasoned that she had no one to take her over from Taminig—maybe none of her village family owned an outrigger, and the thought therefore suddenly came to Orni that he could sail her to Niga and that she would then shorten his search for the diver.

Putting the ale glass down on the table, Orni made a move to get up.

"Where're you going?" Tobe asked curiously.

"To ask Iloli if she knows where exactly that fool diver is hiding."

For a fat man, Tobe jumped quite easily out of his chair and caught Orni's arm. "For the—are you crazy? The thought of it! You take my advice and have nothing to do with that girl! Hear me? Have nothing to do with her!"

PUZZLED, but knowing that the pub owner was his good friend and had never before steered him wrong, Orni nodded and slowly took his chair again. But curiosity gnawed on Orni's insides. He glanced out the screened door again, and there was Iloli talking to Jenks, the mate on Captain Gray's lugger.

Now what would Jenks be wanting with Iloli, Orni asked himself dourly. Tobe meant well, but maybe this was one time not to listen to him? He saw Jenks talking to the girl, and then she shook her head emphatically, as if to say "No." Orni could not restrain himself any longer—he faced the pub owner and at the same time brought his calloused hand hard upon the table. The two ale glasses jumped, and Tobe looked up, startled.

"I don't know what's going on," Orni said seriously, "but I sure expect you to tell me, Tobe. Something's brewing around that girl out there. If she takes Jenks to Chief Adi, I'll never forgive you!" Orni shook his finger at the pub owner. "Now, look-a here. I can't afford to be left out; I got to get to Adi, and I got to have him on my side. Right now, pronto. If you won't tell me what's what, I'll have to find out for myself!"

Tobe sighed. There was nothing left for him to do but talk. It was all very simple—

The relationship between Chief Adi and Iloli had been mutually pleasant, until Iloli got the idea that a husband and wife relationship had better advantages. Adi agreed that it had advantages—for the wife. He promptly went on a walk-about and was now hiding out on Niga and was waiting for

news that Iloli had become sweet on some other village boy.

As for the girl, Iloli wanted Adi and no one else. She didn't know where to find Adi, but she was willing to do anything to locate him.

"I helped Adi get a boat," the pub owner said. "Iloli must've guessed that something was up—she kept hanging around, but I saved Adi from her clutches." He paused to think about it, then added with a thin smile, "Adi was so grateful he offered to show me the best pearl beds, providing I got a ship and took him off Niga before Iloli found him. He'll be safe there for a time." Tobe's eyes sparkled. "The best pearl beds, Orni," he said sadly. "You know Adi can do it."

Orni nodded. He knew that every pearler in the Arafura was more than willing to take on the native diver. Chief Adi had that uncanny feel where to drop anchor for the best pearlshell, but better than that was Adi's consistency in fishing up shell with large round rosée-tinted pearls on which little work was needed to bring the owner a small fortune.

Then Captain Gray and his seven luggers hit Taminig, and both the shrewd Gray and the bucko mate Jenks began inquiring for the whereabouts of Adi. On this score Orni worried, for Gray was in a position to pay more for any diver he wanted, though Orni banked on the chance that Adi would remember their first pearling try off the straits. That was the time when he and Billy saved Adi's life when a shark snapped his lines—Billy had been resting on deck after a long dive, but at sign of the danger had picked up a lead shoe for a weight and the end of a line, and had jumped into the sea as if it were nothing worse than a safe indoor pool. Orni had then hauled them both up, and Chief Adi said he'd repay that favor; Orni had shrugged it off—in the islands you learn never to expect gratitude from a native.

Despite his thoughts and Tobe's occasional remark, Orni was thinking of something else. He had to beat Captain Gray and Jenks in finding Chief Adi, and a faint whisper back of his head kept telling him that Iloli was not as dumb as she looked. Orni was becoming more certain that she knew exactly where to find Adi. Slapping his calloused hands together, Orni jumped up, and his back kinked painfully, causing him to sit down again.

"Better go to Moresby and let a good doctor look you over," Tobe suggested casually.

"Bah!" Orni snorted. "When Ling Jong gets back from Darwin he'll fix me up."

"Bah yourself," the pub owner retorted. "Them Chinese herbs'll kill you one of these days. Dried lizards, leaves and ground seed pearls! Don't that stuff choke you up, Orni?"

Orni lifted his glass and downed the stale ale without answering. "So long, Tobe," he said. "See you later." He picked up his cap and started for the door.

"Where're you going?"

"Going to find Chief Adi before Gray or Jenks finds him."

Tobe shrugged, as if sorry he couldn't leave the musty pub and go on the outdoor adventure with the old pearler. "Steer clear of Iloli," he warned with a shake of his short fat finger.

TO STEER clear of Iloli was the last thing on Orni's mind. He came out of the pub and looked up the street where Jenks was still talking to the native girl. The big hairy-chested mate was apparently in a hurry to say things, but Iloli seemed uninterested.

Orni tipped his cap at a rakish angle and slowly started down the path. He had gone hardly ten yards when, as he expected, he heard the girl's bare feet tapping the dust as she ran up behind him. Turning around and flashing his friendliest smile, Orni came to a stop and waited for her.

She was very excited. "Iloli like Chief Adi and wanna be husban' and wife. Is ollo right tribe chiefs and ollo right ollo 'round, but Chief Adi run 'way to Niga Island—"

"My dear girl!" Orni cut her off with a pleased air. "I'm sure happy to know your pidgin isn't 'him fella b'long me fella' stuff, and I know what you want, and I'll sure help you out." He rubbed his hands together. He had guessed right! The girl knew Chief Adi was on Niga, and he was now sure she'd know exactly where to find him!

"Take Iloli to Niga Island, Cap'n Buckson!" the girl pleaded, not too loudly.

Orni nodded as he glanced after the retreating figure of Jenks. Well, this was one time Captain Gray would not have the upper hand, Orni reasoned. Evidently Iloli had re-

fused Jenks the honor of getting her to Niga, and the old pearler now felt his way was clear. Once he got Adi on board the lugger it would be a simple matter to sign him on for a pearling voyage, and by the time they returned to Taminig, in some four weeks, Ling Jong would be back from Darwin—just in time to buy the finest of the finest pearls.

Orni quickly made his arrangements with Iloli. Because the District Officer Doughan would not tolerate a native girl on a white man's ship without her own kind along for an escort, Orni and the girl agreed to meet that evening secretly off the point—Orni would be waiting for her with the dory, then get her on board, and then make sail for Niga.

"Ollo right," the girl giggled and ran off.

Orni went on down the pathway, happy in the thought that this once he'd be all the jumps ahead of Captain Gray. He was not aware that Tobe, the pub owner, had been watching him and Iloli make their plans.

BACK on board the lugger Orni told Billy and Megu what had happened; the otherwise skeptical Billy felt good and talked about buying himself long-wanted luxuries on a few months spent in Darwin, while the *Soholi* instantly rushed forward to tell the other natives that a celebration was in order—they started up a happy chant, which carried a forlorn note indeed to the two white men in the cabin below.

"Are you sure," Billy asked, "that the girl won't doublecross us and take Jenks over to Niga?"

"Stop worrying," Orni frowned.

"It was just a thought."

Orni sighed. "If it'll make you feel any better, take the binoculars and watch Jenks' lugger."

Billy did just that, but nothing out of the ordinary happened; the seven ships lay tight at anchor, with little movement on board except for the cooks dumping waste over the aft rail.

When the screeching of birds on Taminig died down and the paleness of late afternoon settled on the darkly silhouetted palms, Orni swung over the side and shoved the dory off for the shore. There was a light breeze blowing seaward, rippling the water into soft lapping sounds against the dory.

Beaching and looking around, Orni saw no shadow moving toward him. He waited a while, then became restless. What if Iloli had changed her mind, he asked himself, or she might've decided to bestow her affections on some other village boy, or even might've somehow got on board Jenks' lugger? Orni growled under his breath and peered into the sea gloom. That sure would be a fine kettle o' fish if Jenks was already sailing for Niga!

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Orni turned expectantly. He faced Tobe, the pub owner.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Orni asked irritably. In the diffused light of the bright moon falling on a still sea, he noticed that the fat man was looking around as if he knew the girl was supposed to be present.

"Where's Iloli?" Tobe asked.

"Why don't you mind your own business?" Orni retorted angrily.

"Now don't be a fool," said the pub owner calmly. "In a way, this is my business. I sort of figured myself into this deal with Chief Adi, and I wouldn't want to find us both left out by some foolish mistake on your part, Orni."

"Are you by any chance telling me you expect to get a share of the pearl profits?" Orni shouted.

"Certainly," Tobe answered with a drawl. "Didn't I tell you where to find Adi?" He paused, again looked around. "And now you want to spoil our chances with Adi by taking that girl to Niga Island. I know all about it, Orni; come clean. Where's she?"

"Okay," Orni agreed. "Okay! You're in on the profits, but I resent you telling me how to get Adi on my side!"

Tobe didn't have time to say anything in answer, for at that instant Iloli's voice was heard on the path. The girl wasn't alone, for another voice chattered volubly. Then they came into view. Iloli was as Orni had seen her earlier that day, but the other was a barrel-like native woman in a loose dress with a grunting suckling pig held under her flabby-fleshed arm.

Orni couldn't help but groan as he understood the situation. Iloli, knowing that the District Officer wouldn't tolerate her going on board a white man's ship, had decided to play safe and had brought with her a chap-

eron, and the chaperon had brought along her pet animal of the household—a suckling pig that wasn't at all pleased with the circumstances.

"Now wasn't I right in advising you to steer clear of her?" Tobe asked in a whisper.

Orni detected a jeer in the pub owner's tone. "Keep out of this!"

Iloli now stepped close to the men, said, "Here's Iloli, and here's Bachatuka. We go now?"

"Hell!" Orni said under his breath.

The pig started to squeal. Bachatuka started to talk to the squealing pig. The more she talked in what were supposed to be soothing words the louder the squealing became.

"We go now?" Iloli prompted. She had to shout to be heard.

Orni cupped both hands over his ears and looked at the grinning pub owner for help.

"Serves you right, you old sea coot," Tobe said. "I gave you plenty of warning!"

Orni's leathery face screwed into a wry scowl. "Tell her to let the pig go! Hey, Iloli! Tell her to—"

The high-pitched squeals tore through the palms and the pig worked his way free to jump away. Bachatuka started to run after it, and for the moment the surroundings were fairly quiet.

Orni sighed, then, taking advantage of the situation, said, "Come on, let's get going."

Tobe then pulled a revolver out of his hip pocket and showed it to the old pearler.

Surprised at the sight of a gun in the pub owner's hand, Orni looked at him. "You gone mad? What're you up to?"

"I'm going to put some sense into your thick head, Orni. If you don't send Iloli back to the village, I'll fire this revolver. I'll do it, Orni."

Orni's brow knotted. "Fire the revolver? At who?"

"Into the air, you fool!"

"But—but what for?"

Tobe lifted the gun, and there was the sharp click as he cocked the hammer. "When Doughan, the D. O., hears the shots, he'll send his constabulary corporal up the path to investigate, and he himself will take the launch and scout around the inlet. I figure if he finds a native girl with you, or on your lugger—" Tobe shrugged. "Well, you know how Doughan is about such things."

Orni knew Tobe was a man of his word, and he knew how Doughan was about such things, so he fumed with anger as he took the native girl aside and told her to return to her village. "I'll get you to Niga Island," he whispered so that Tobe couldn't hear, "but not tonight. Mebbe tomorrow. I make promise."

Iloli at first refused to leave, but Orni finally convinced her it was for the best all around. "And take Bachatuka and her pig home, too." When he and the pub owner were at last alone, Orni said, "And you sure proved to be a friend of mine."

Tobe chuckled. "I'm only trying to look after my own interests. If you would've showed up on Niga with Iloli in tow, take my word that Adi would never forgive you."

Orni was still uncertain how to weigh the matter. "What do we do now?" he asked.

"We'll wait and see what happens."

"You mean wait around while Captain Gray and Jenks get to Chief Adi and sign him on? Not on your life, Tobe! I'll figure something out!"

Again the pub owner shook his short fat finger at the old pearler. "But steer clear of that girl," he warned.

Orni rowed the dory back to the lugger. He was careful not to mention the Bachatuka and pig incident—if Billy ever found out he'd ride him a couple of months. Orni mumbled to himself as he watched the *Soholi* boys amble along the deck to the bow to turn in; one of them squatted down by the foremast to stand watch.

Billy stood near Orni and lighted a cigarette. "Why don't you tell me what went wrong?" he urged, leaning his back against the rail.

"Nothing went wrong!" Orni answered irritably.

Billy shrugged and blew smoke. "It's not like you to come back without an explanation. Didn't the girl want to come along?"

Orni couldn't help but think of the squealing pig. "Forget the whole thing!" he snapped.

Billy flipped the cigarette over the rail and went below.

Orni remained on deck, in a sullen mood, his mind still trying to puzzle out the best way to get to Chief Adi—yet to insure that the native would dive for him and not for Captain Gray.

DESPITE his staying awake most of the night, no plan presented itself to Orni, and with the first flush of dawn he came topside and glanced toward Captain Gray's fleet. He even counted them, unconsciously; all seven of them were at anchor, but just then a longboat put off from Gray's own ship. Orni squinted at the two hunched men in the boat and made out Jenks rowing and Captain Gray seated at the stern.

Orni roused Billy and told Megu to keep the boys on hand on the forward deck.

"What's up?" asked Billy; he yawned and stretched as he peered at the longboat.

"There they come," Orni said. "They're going to pay us a visit."

"Any harm in that?"

"If I pay a visit," Orni pointed out dourly, "I'd not be doing it this time of day. They're up to something, and I'll bet it's got its strings tied to Chief Adi. Now keep your eyes and ears open."

The longboat pulled alongside and the two men came on deck. Their greeting was curt and cold; there was no pretense at friendliness.

"I've got important business with you, Buckson," Captain Gray said and at the same time threw a contemptuous look at Billy Crusse. His long arms swept aside his white duck coat and dug into his pants pockets; the mate Jenks scowled at Billy and took a spread-legged position next to the arrogant owner of the fleet.

"You can start talking," Orni said quietly.

"I said 'important business,' so I'll thank you to send your man for'ard," Captain Gray said impatiently.

Orni pursed his lips. "This isn't your ship, Gray. I'll have Billy hear whatever you've got to say, so start talking or shove off." He glared from Gray at Jenks, and added, "This trip I don't mind your cabin boy coming aboard, but in the future I'll thank you to leave him in the boat."

Captain Gray grabbed Jenks by the arm as the big mate took a step toward Orni. "All right, Buckson. I'm here to make a deal with you."

Orni clucked his tongue and turned to wink at Billy. "That's what I expected. Maybe you want me to tell you where Chief Adi is hiding?"

Gray shook his head. "I know where Adi is, and, in case you doubt me, I'll tell you. Adi is over on Niga." He paused and grinned shrewdly at Orni.

For a time only the lazy creaking of the ship's rigging was audible. Orni frowned, not sure what to make of the whole thing. He knew Gray could pay Adi far better, but he also had the feeling that something else was involved in the finding of the native diver. "I'm listening," he said.

CAPTAIN GRAY first glanced at Jenks, then hunched his shoulders, as if to say the fish was already in the net. "I've a proposition for you, Buckson. I'll pay you one hundred dollars, right now, in cash, if you'll promise not to try and sign on Chief Adi."

Jenks coughed lightly.

"Oh, yes," Gray said. "I also want you to promise not to sail to Niga."

Orni sighed, but did not say anything.

"You know as well as I," Gray went on, "that I can pay Adi better than you can, but, as I said, it's worth it to me if you'll not interfere. One hundred dollars, cash, now." He patted the bulging wallet in his coat's inside pocket.

Orni pretended to be thinking over the proposition. "What if I figure on signing Adi on myself?"

Gray twisted his face, raised one brow, shrugged.

"You won't get to Niga!" Jenks rasped. "We'll ram you!"

Billy took a step toward the burly mate. "You think you're sailor enough, punk? You just try it and I'll knock your teeth out your ears!"

Smiling, Orni threw a little sarcasm into the argument. "Gentlemen, gentlemen!" He turned toward Gray, who evidently was thinking the same as Jenks. "I don't know what to say. I'd be a fool to refuse your offer, but I'm not so sure you got the upper hand with Chief Adi." He sighed. "No, Gray, I just don't think you've got me over the rail. As for your hundred dollars—I pay that every month to each of my crew."

His crew, standing within earshot, heard this remark and every one of them screwed their faces. "Cap'n Buckson make joke," Megu explained to the other boys, but their faces remained puzzled nevertheless.

"You refuse?" Gray shouted loudly.

Orni was silent for a moment. Refusing might not be the healthy thing to do, as far

as his lugger was concerned, for he had no doubts that Gray and Jenks would do just what they had threatened. They'd ram him, sure. On the other hand, he told himself, there might be a way to outsmart them—he thought of the many times when Gray had outsmarted him by intercepting shell buyers and had sold his haul for lower prices, had always crowded his ships into the same pearling grounds where Orni's lugger was working. Well, could he now outsmart Gray? The shrewd fleet owner was willing to pay off and have a free hand to sign on the native diver, yet if Orni was stubborn enough to try and sail for Niga, he knew Gray would use one of his fastest ships to ram him. Gray was at the stage now where he'd not mind the red tape of an investigation by Doughan, the D. O., but in the meantime a rammed lugger would put Orni out of business. He'd not have a ship to even haul cargo!

Anger boiled inside the old pearler, but he managed to keep it suppressed while his brain tried to figure a way to outsmart Captain Gray and Jenks. Should he take the hundred and let well enough alone? By the holy spanker sail, *no!*

There was still one factor, one little thing which Orni hoped was not known to either Gray or his mate.

Orni felt his way carefully. "One hundred is hardly enough, Gray," he said, casual-like. "Hardly enough."

Captain Gray took a deep breath and pulled his hands out of his pockets. "I'm doing you a favor," he said hoarsely. "I can get to Niga whether you play along with me or not. But I'm a square shooter—I'm willing to pay, if you'll keep out of my way. Well?"

Orni shook his head, and then played his ace. "You seem to forget that I've got Chief Adi's girl on my side. Why only last night I was talking to Iloli ashore, and would've taken her over to Niga, since I know Adi is more than eager to see her, but she had to get her folks to bake a pie."

Orni paused. He saw Gray's brows twitch as a sudden thought must have come to the man, and then the shrewd competitor threw a quick glance at his mate Jenks. Both of them then stepped to the rail for a whispered conference. Gray started to smile broadly.

Orni pretended dumb. "Maybe you don't believe that I've got Iloli on my side?"

Billy stepped up now and grabbed Orni by the arm. "You're talking too much, Pop. All they got to do is—"

"Exactly," Captain Gray cut in, his pinched face leering as he started to strut around Orni. "Our deal's off, Buckson. You just gave me and Jenks here an excellent idea, and we thank you." He bowed mockingly. "Instead of letting you bother with Iloli, we'll do Chief Adi the favor of bringing his favorite girl to him ourselves."

Orni put on his most indignant attitude. "You guys are crooks! This isn't fair!"

Jenks saw fit to say something. "Captain Buckson, you're getting plumb old to make a slip like that. I had you pegged for a—"

"Pipe down, punk!" Billy yelled.

Orni felt warm inside in the knowledge that Billy was defending him. He hung his head, waited for Gray and Jenks to leave. Megu and the boys came aft and stood silently awaiting the next development.

When the oar squeaks were a ways off, Orni started to chuckle.

Billy sighed and shook his head at the old pearler's antics. "The heat must be getting you, Pop," he said.

Orni slapped his thigh. "Call me an old man, huh? I sure outsmarted those two crooks! *Ha!* Billy, I tell you there's only one thing worth a sail in this world, and it's the man who uses his head." He stepped to the bulwark and squinted against the sun at the longboat—Gray was making for shore, and Orni knew his competitor would look up Iloli. "Look at those fools! They're sure in a hurry to get Iloli and take her to Chief Adi." Then, in a serious tone, Orni got his crew around and explained to them the entire situation.

When Orni stopped talking, Billy stuck his hands into his hip pockets, and said: "So what? All I see is that Adi will be mad at Gray and Jenks. What does that get us?"

Orni pushed back his cap. "Billy, you're a constant worry to me. Don't you know how a native who doesn't want to get married will react when he sees the girl brought to him?"

"No, I don't. Maybe you're an expert, so you tell me."

"Why, Adi will run! What else? The instant he spots Iloli on Niga Island, I figure

he'll jump into the sea and try to swim back here to Taminig." Orni paused and lifted his hand to catch his crew's attention. "Look-a here, all you. I figure Adi will make a run for it, and I figure if we're off shore he might run right into our dory. Then we simply 'rescue' him by taking him on board." Orni slapped his hands together for emphasis. "Don't you think Adi will be grateful that we saved him?"

The heads nodded, even Billy's.

"Righto!" Orni exclaimed. "Hoist sail, you pack o' deck thieves! We'll have the best pearl beds—because Adi will gratefully take us to them! Let's get under way!"

THE crew jumped to the ropes and sheets. They rocked the anchor free and weighed it, then started hoisting sails.

Orni remained aft all this time, his binoculars trained on Captain Gray's fleet, for he expected they'd not be idle. They weren't. Captain Gray and Jenks had returned to their ship, and with them was Iloli—and the fat chaperon Bachatuka with her pet suckling pig. Lugger after lugger weighed anchor and hoisted sails.

"This'll be a race," Orni mumbled. He shifted the binoculars to take in the shore, and was in time to see Tobe, the pub owner, and Doughan, the District Officer, boarding the launch.

Then the launch swung out—straight toward Orni's lugger.

The old pearler cursed under his breath, but he did not shout an order to put about or drop anchor.

The breeze started to freshen and the sails bellied out. Billy came aft and took the wheel, then wanted to know what to do about the D. O.'s launch.

"Do nothing!" Orni snapped. "I'll not put back now! If this is any of Tobe's tricks to keep me off Niga, I'll not stand for it! Steady as she goes!"

"Aye, aye, Pop!" Billy smiled. "Pearls for us, and the devil take the D. O.!"

When the launch caught up with them, it was only to discharge Tobe. As big as the pub owner was, he made the jump safely, caught the rail and hung on.

Orni helped him over the rail onto the deck. Tobe waved to the D. O. "Thanks, Doughan! I'll do as much for you some day!"

Putting the tiller over, Doughan shouted: "Good luck with pearls!"

As the launch fell astern, Orni spun Tobe around. "Now you tell me what's the big idea!" he demanded.

The pub owner shrugged and grinned. "I got tired sitting in that old pub, and I saw Gray and Jenks make some kind of deal with Iloli. I put two and two together."

"And?"

"It added cockeyed. After all, Orni, Gray's got seven ships to your one, so I figured you might need some help."

"Nor are you forgetting that you've a share in the pearls—*if* we fish any?"

"If we get Chief Adi," smiled Tobe, "we'll fish the best pearls in the Arafura." The pub owner glanced astern. "Better look sharp, Orni," he warned, "here comes trouble."

Orni scowled. The swiftest of Gray's ships was fast overhauling him! She was light, with taller masts than the others, and she seemed to skip over the sea in easy leaps. Far behind her came the squat ship from which, Orni knew, Captain Gray and Jenks were watching the race—and would watch the ramming.

"Yaaa!" Orni roared at the pub owner. "You bring your bulk on board to slow me down! Look at her come! Know what they're up to? They wanna ram us!"

TOBE leaned against the rail. "You'll think of a way out, Orni."

The old pearler grunted and jumped to the wheel. He shouted his orders. Billy grabbed Tobe and rushed him forward, and Megu put the boys to the ropes. Skirting around the reefs, Orni tacked about and made for the open sea. But that one speedy lugger was behind him!

The bows of both ships sliced the tepid choppy waters, the sails caught more of the freshening breeze.

"Belay your lines!" Orni roared.

Billy came on the run. "They'll ram us, Pop!"

"Mebbe not! Stand by with the boys, Billy! I'm gonna put 'er hard about!"

"You do, and you'll pile us on the reefs!"

Orni held his wheel down hard, and out of the corner of his weather eye watched the Gray ship bearing down on him. The other six ships came at a good clip, though Orni

knew he could easily keep his lead if he but shook off this one immediate menace.

Megu chattered to the four *Soholi* boys amidships, and Billy braced himself at the mainmast. Tobe just stood by the rail, his eyes on the old pearler.

Orni held her steady, craning his neck to look at the sea over his bow, where the water appeared patched over the hidden reefs. Only a little ways more . . . hold out a little ways more—

Orni put the wheel over and the lugger swung lazily.

The man on the wheel of Gray's speedy ship saw the move—and then made his mistake. He veered sharply, for he had expected Orni to put full about, and he never saw that patched-looking sea over the hidden reefs. He was so intent on the ramming that he never realized what he was getting into.

Orni righted the wheel and the lugger wallowed for a moment, for enough time for the bow of Gray's ship to cut the water just astern of the rudder. Orni was clear, and the other ship, the wind driving her, rushed head-on up onto the saw-toothed reef. It was too late to lower sail or put her about. Her hull screamed as the reef bit into her, and her forward mast snapped. She was stuck high and helpless.

The sails of Orni's lugger bellied again and she forged ahead. "That'll teach you some seamanship," Orni mumbled.

Billy now pulled out his bandanna and took off his cap to wipe away sweat. "For a moment I thought—"

Orni chuckled. "*Haw!* That mate'll be wiser next time. At least he'll look afore he jumps." He squinted forward. "Ahoy, Megu! Come take the wheel!"

The *Soholi* came aft, showing his big white teeth in a broad grin. As he took the wheel, he asked: "Boys asking what day mebbe Cap'n O'ni pay hund'd dollars eve'y-body?"

Orni pursed his lips. "Tell the boys, and tell yourself, *if* we get Chief Adi, and *if* we find pearls, then *maybe* I'll be able to afford that kind of money. But mind now, I'm not making any promises."

"Shu thing," Megu nodded, still grinning, understanding that there would never be such pay, and not because there wouldn't be pearls. "I toll boys it was all big joke for Cap'n G'ay."

Billy and Tobe burst into a good-natured laugh. The boys amidships grunted and shrugged.

Far astern of Orni's lugger one of Gray's ships was standing off at the reefs, while the remaining five trailed in Orni's wake.

IT WAS near high noon when Orni hove to offshore at Niga Island and let go the anchor, and even before the lugger swung around with the current to pull tight against her rope he had the dory lowered and himself and Tobe for the shore.

The native village was set deep back within the shade of tall palms, with the sixty-foot-long men's house at right angles to the path in a small clearing. Bare boys ran in all directions, screaming at the two white men, dogs barked, and women put their heads together to whisper in a language neither Orni nor Tobe understood.

Chief Adi came out of the house and greeted them warmly. He was a towering six-footer with broad muscular shoulders and black frizzy hair framing a not-too-thick grinning face.

The talk-talk was short, with Orni carefully explaining that he was merely sailing past Niga and had stopped to make proper greetings to a great diver. The compliment, Orni noticed, did not go to waste—Adi filled his great chest with air and his dark face gleamed happily.

"Well," Orni said, "we must leave now, Chief. I expect we'll sail in an hour. If you change your mind and want to go pearling, well—just come aboard." He chuckled. "Glad to have you, anytime. So long."

At the beach they were just in time to see Captain Gray, the mate Jenks, Iloli, and Bachatuka with her suckling pig getting out of the longboat.

"Ha!" Orni said under his breath as he watched them walk across the sand strip toward the village pathway. "This'll warm my bones. I sure hope Chief Adi knocks Gray's teeth in for bringing that girl here."

Tobe squinted seaward. "It sure is a fine day for pearling—if you know the right beds." Then he sighed. "Let's hope everything goes the way you figured it."

Orni was more optimistic. "You'll see Adi running into the sea any minute now. Just you watch."

At the pathway, Captain Gray paused and

threw a glance at Orni and the pub owner. Telling Jenks to wait, he ambled over, a sly smirk on his pinched face.

Orni remained seated on the gunwale of the beached dory and tried to look like a man who had just lost out on an important business deal.

Captain Gray laughed softly, derisively. "Well, well, Buckson. I see you haven't got Chief Adi. Just as I expected. Too bad, too bad."

Orni put on his best scowl. "You beat me to it, by getting Iloli to come with you. I'm not too sorry for myself, Gray; all this cost you a ship. Maybe I'll press charges against you that you gave your man orders to ram me."

Gray laughed. "We can deny the charges, and I don't mind at all losing that ship. Just think of the pearls that'll more than make up for her! Buckson, you ought to retire—you're too old for this life. Takes a tough man to win out with me."

A flush of anger rose inside Orni, but he checked himself. "Maybe you're right," he said quietly.

The pub owner nudged him. "Come on, Orni, let's shove off. No use wasting time here." He began pushing the dory as Orni straightened up.

Orni lent him a hand, but he kept his eyes on the group walking up the path. When they disappeared from sight, Orni stopped pushing. "Hold it, Tobe." He ran across the beach to Captain Gray's longboat, took both oars and slung them over his shoulder and returned to the dory. "All right now, Tobe. We'll stay offshore here. Chief Adi ought to be along any minute."

They didn't have long to wait.

SOMEWHERE in the village a sudden shouting started, then the excited barking of the village dogs; the shouting became louder, women screamed, dogs yelped and barked, and the whole bedlam started to drift down the path toward the beach. All through it Orni distinguished the high-pitched squealing of Bachatuka's pig.

"Here they come!" Tobe yelled. He was no longer skeptical of Orni's wisdom, and his big hand reached out to slap the old pearler on the back.

Orni winced with the pain of that kink in his back, said, "Oooomph!" but kept his eyes on the spot where the path came out onto the sandy beach. He saw frightened birds lifting in flight.

The first one to hit the beach was Chief Adi. He ran swiftly, in a quick and sure-stepping run, and he didn't hesitate which way to head. He saw Orni's dory twenty yards offshore, and he headed straight for it. But the next runner was Jenks, right behind Adi. Jenks was fast, too, and, worse, he must have known something about football, for he threw himself full length at Adi's knees, spilling the native to the ground.

"The devil!" Tobe exclaimed. "They got him!"

"I'd not bet on that," Orni mused. "Give the man a chance to get to his feet."

At the same instant Bachatuka's squealing pig ran out of the taller land grass and made straight for the two sprawled men. The excited pig was running with its head down, and it blindly collided with Jenks' buttocks. As it hit, the pig let out a mixture of squeals and grunts, backed away, then ran down the beach. Jenks, not sure what had hit him, turned around to look, and that gave Adi a chance to get to his feet. He sized up the situation—saw the pig nearly trampled by Captain Gray, Iloli, and the chattering Bachatuka. Chief Adi decided Jenks was the most formidable, so he picked up a coconut and flicked it off the mate's head.

Iloli was calling to Adi at the top of her lungs, but the native paid no heed. He splashed into the sea and with long strokes made for Orni's dory.

Orni helped him in.

"Quick, Cap'n Buckson!" Chief Adi pleaded. "Help gettum Adi outta here!"

"There, there," Orni soothed as he winked at Tobe. "Of course, I'll help you, Chief. Nothing to worry about. Just you relax now. Tobe—put some pep into that rowing." He winked again at the pub owner.

What might have appeared to Chief Adi to be a casual conversation, ended in his promising to sign on a pearling job.

On the beach, Captain Gray stood by the longboat, with no oars; he was shaking his fist seaward, trying to attract the attention of someone aboard one of his five ships, but it was too hot a day for any of the crew to be on the sun-bleached rails. Next to Gray stood the slim Iloli, while farther up the beach Bachatuka was chasing her squealing

pig. Jenks lay in the sand, still unconscious.

On board the lugger, Orni got sail up in a hurry, then he saw to it that Chief Adi signed the papers for the pearling voyage—all lawful and proper.

The trim ship keeled with the wind as she got under way. The *Soholi* boys started up a queer sea chanty in pidgin English, while Chief Adi, content to have escaped the clutches of Iloli, sat on a coil of rope and rested.

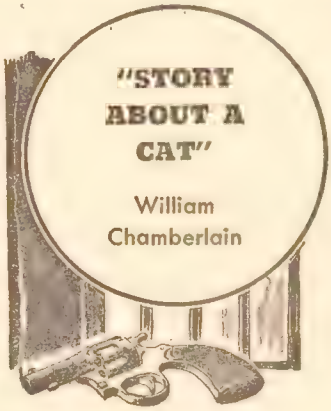
With nothing around them now but the open sea, Orni called Billy to the wheel, then went below and fetched an old greasy chart, laid it out before the native diver, and asked: "Where do we go, Chief? Where are the best pearl beds this year?"

Chief Adi glanced at the chart and shook his head. "No unde'stand paper talk. Best pearl beds by side of small islands." He pointed ahead of the lugger's bows. "So way."

Tobe put his finger on the chart. "That'd be the reef islands off Likugu."

Orni smiled. "We're heading right. *Haw-ho-ho!* This is where we make our haul! Steady as she goes, Billy!"

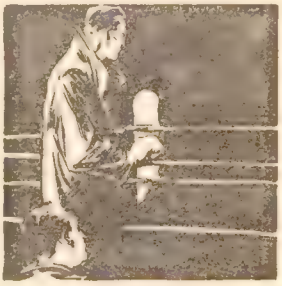
A CROOK NOVELETTE WITH ALL SORTS OF ORIGINAL ANGLES



CADDO CAMERON

JOHN B. KELLY

"A Turnover for Tony"



a complete novel

by KERRY O'NEIL

Hard punching is all right, but the thing is to hit something!

The captain had his reputation on his mind, the beachcomber had gold on his mind—and didn't know what to do about it. . . .

"Island Freighter"

A novelette

CHARLES YERKOW

★ *All in the next* **SHORT STORIES** ★

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

CONDUCTED BY PETE KUHLHOFF

One of 143

A FELLOW by the name of James Paris Lee (born in Scotland, August 9, 1831) designed a single-shot rifle which he figured would be fine for military use.

So, he got busy, contacted the right people, did a little plain and fancy talking, and lo and behold, in 1874 Congress appropriated $10,000 for making and testing the Lee single-shot rifle at Springfield Armory. Mr. Lee thereupon moved from his home in Milwaukee, Wis., to Springfield, Mass., to supervise the manufacture.

By the time that 143 of these rifles were produced the 10,000 bucks were expended. This means that the rifles cost almost $70 each to make, which for those days, when a dollar was worth one hundred cents, seems like a lot of dough. Especially so, when we consider that the stock and fittings, including the barrel, are practically the same as the Model-1873 Springfield single-shot rifle which was in production at that time.

In other words, most of the appropriations was used for producing the receiver, breech block and hammer mechanism. These parts are comparatively simple (see sketch) and should be fairly easy to manufacture. Anyway that's the way it happened.

These guns evidently were experimental only, as I have never found record that they were issued to troops for trial.

Some years ago I ran across one of these rifles (serial No. 116) in perfect (new) condition, and as I had never taken one apart I bought it for $20.

The action of this piece has always intrigued me, but I never got around to shooting it much until a couple of years ago.

At that time I searched around in my reloading cabinet, and loaded up some cartridge cases using every type .45-caliber bullet that I had on hand. This included 300, 405 and 500-grain bullets with grease grooves, and 417, 540 and 550-grain paper-patched bullets, and regular .45-caliber round balls which are generally used for gallery (indoor) shooting. Two different charges were used, namely, 55 and 70 grains of FG black powder.

The grease groove bullets were the regular .45-90 (300-gr.), the regular .45-70 (405-gr.) and (500-gr.) bullets, all sized to .459 inch.

The paper-patched bullets were a horse of a different color. I knew, of course, that they were not of exactly the right size, but they were all hollow base and of fairly soft metal, so I figured that they would adapt themselves to the bore size when fired. Anyway, I wanted to see how they would shoot.

The lightest ones (417-gr.) were old Sharps bullets measuring exactly .45 inch. Next came some old George Gibbs 540-grain bullets made in England, and measuring .455 inch. The other ones were ancient Ballard bullets made by Winchester; they weighed 550 grains and measured .4465 inch (I have used these bullets in both .44 and .45-caliber Sharps rifles with good results).

The Ballard bullets were the best-looking ones in the bunch, having a long, beautifully tapered nose, and looked quite streamlined compared to the others which had a more blunt shnazola. These paper-patched bullets were all seated in the cartridge cases on top of a grease and cardboard disc.

Some of the younger shooters may not be familiar with the paper-patched bullet, so perhaps a brief description is in order. Such bullets are cast perfectly smooth without the grease cannelures or grooves and are swaged to exact bore diameter. Then a strong piece of thin paper is wrapped around their bearing surface and folded over onto the base, which in many instances are hollow.

When the bullets are fired, the rifling, if everything is of proper size, cuts only into

the paper without mutilating the metal (mixture of tin and lead, 1 to 15 being a good proportion) in any way.

Thus we have a projectile which leaves the rifle in perfect condition, unlike ordinary bullets which leave the muzzle engraved by the rifling. This slight deformation is sometimes detrimental to fine accuracy. The paper patch should leave the bullet at the muzzle.

shot rifle would shoot with about the same degree of accuracy as the Springfield single-shot. Which it did!

There is no use of giving group sizes; besides I can't locate the targets, found my notes OK, but the paper with the holes seems to have vanished. But there are a few points I'd like to mention.

All of the grease groove bullets gave good accuracy and would be all right for hunting,

Lee Single Shot Rifle ••
caliber .45-70

or even target shooting, and the fouling wasn't so bad.

A little trouble was encountered with the Gibbs bullets (not their fault). With the paper on these bullets they measured .462 inch, which was a little too large for the bore, so when fired the paper was squeezed into the lead and did not leave the bullet at the muzzle. This was overcome by slitting the paper with a razor blade.

The Sharps bullets were apparently just right for the rifle, and the Ballard bullets although a little undersize were soft enough to fill the bore when fired. And, strangely enough, they gave the best accuracy, according to notes made at that time.

Nothing much was accomplished, but I had a fine day of shooting regardless of cold hands and feet. Incidentally, some of the bullets were not recovered until after the snow had melted the next spring.

Gee, I almost forgot to explain the action of this Lee single-shot rifle, model of 1875, patented March 16 of that year.

To Load the Gun.—The spur of the hammer is pushed forward, this lowers the front end of the breech block as it is pivoted at the rear. The ejector locks the front end of the block in this position until a cartridge is inserted and pushed into the chamber. Then the hammer spur is pulled back to half-cock or safety, this raises the breech block to a position in line with the cartridge in the chamber and locks it there.

To Fire.—The hammer spur is pulled rearward to full-cock position, and the trigger pulled.

When using paper-patched bullets the bore of the rifle is cleaned between shots to keep the black powder fouling from building up to such an extent that the paper would be injured.

Fine rifles manufactured for and using this type of bullet have made enviable records on the target at long ranges up to and even over a thousand yards. I have an old Sharps rifle in .45 caliber, which has six narrow lands and six wide grooves in the bore. This gun with proper paper-patched bullet ammunition will put them in at 500 yards just about as well as any rifle that I have ever used.

When loading the Gibbs and Ballard bullets I had to remove the breech block and hammer mechanism from the rifle for each shot in order to chamber the cartridges, as they were too long for the receiver.

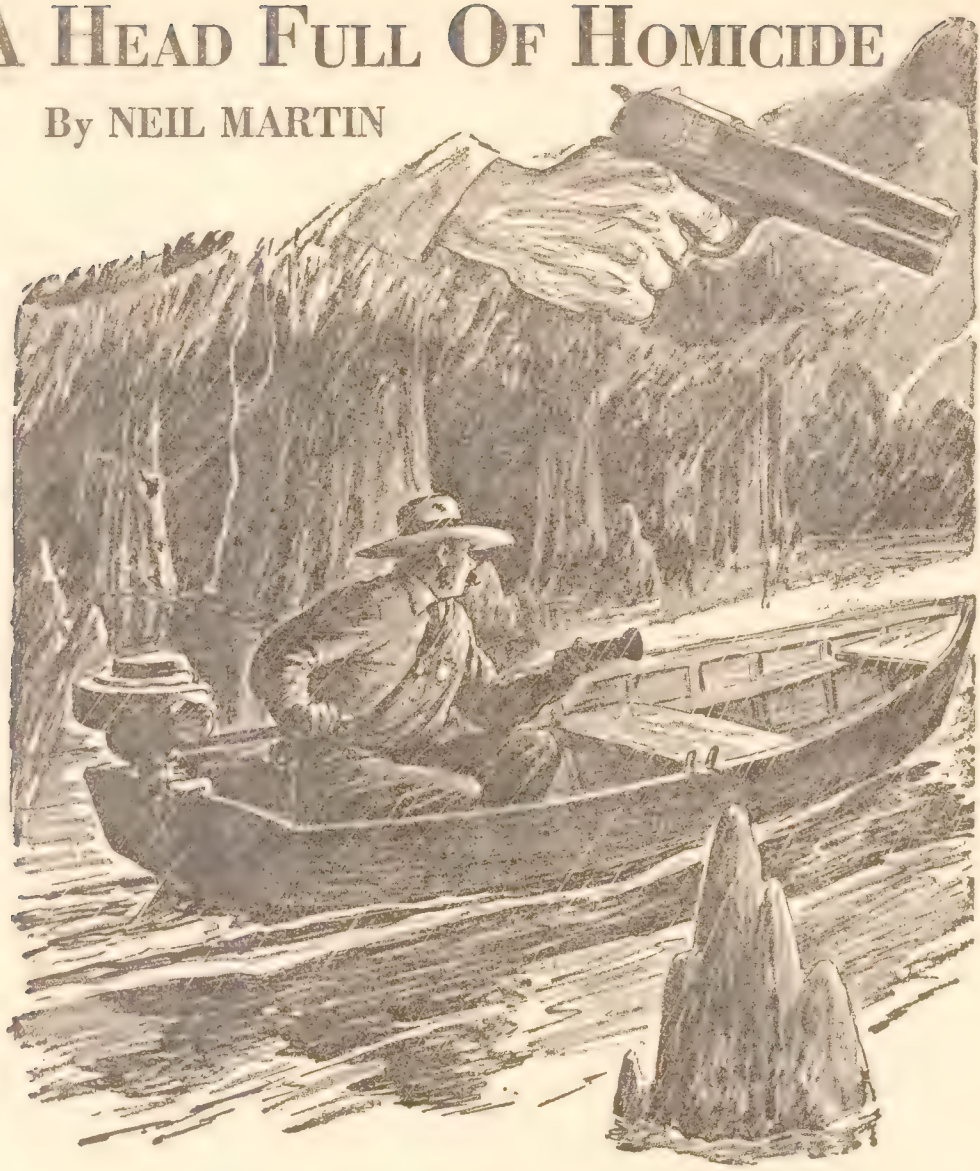
The targets were placed in front of a deep snow bank as I wanted to recover the bullets in unmutilated condition for examination. The range was both 50 and 100 yards for the conical bullets, and 25 yards for the round balls.

I'm telling you all of this just to show to what great lengths a gun bug will go just to verify strong suspicions that the Lee single-

(*Continued on page 90*)

A Head Full Of Homicide

By NEIL MARTIN



AS HE fought the steering wheel of the ancient jalopy that served St. Odile as official police car, Henry Pou felt that his spare-time job as investigator for the district attorney's office was fast losing its attractiveness.

A stream of air caused by the forward motion of the car whistled through a hole in the windshield directly in front of his face, causing his eyes to water and blowing the ends of his sweeping handlebar mustache back against his ears as the ramshackle vehicle clattered up the highway toward Sellierville, shimmying like a cooch dancer with palsy.

Henry's professional pride was ruffled. He wanted to unburden himself to his seat companion, a strapping, red-haired young giant, with a white-toothed grin and merry blue eyes in a face the color of boiled shrimp.

But Cajan prudence counselled a still tongue, for this big "Yonkee" on the seat beside him was engaged to marry Estelle Voisin, first cousin to Dominique Voisin,

"No Killer Is Smart," the Cajan Policeman Argued. "If He Was Smart, He Wouldn't Kill."

who so in considerately had chosen Sunday as the day to bump himself off.

"Quel blague!" Henry muttered beneath his handlebar mustache. To him, the prospective chore was comparable to a fine watchmaker being given the job of repairing a broken-down wheelbarrow.

He blinked to clear his watering eyes and peered at the empty road that followed the winding course of Bayou Papillon between twin lines of venerable oaks which stretched moss-draped branches over the highway, as if to shield it from the blistering afternoon sunshine. Removing his right hand from the wheel, he took off his ten-gallon hat and removed from inside the crown a blue bandanna that seemed large as an Oklahoma bed sheet. He glanced sidewise at his companion as he mopped his brow. Somehow, Clarence Orville McConnell's vivid coloring

always made him feel as if he were in close proximity to a hot stove.

"What's on your mind, Henry, my old cabbage?" McConnell queried jocularly. "You haven't spoken for more than ten minutes."

"Got plenty on ma min', me," Henry admitted. "I got me a job that could have been handle' by any wan of Vicou's knucklehaids. Yes."

"Suicide," the younger man said reflectively, "doesn't sound at all like Dominique Voisin. He got too big a kick out of life. Perhaps the D. A. wants you to *cherchez la femme*—or *la femme's* husband."

Henry glanced silently out across the bayou, past a scattering of small farms on the higher ground beyond which the vast sweep of the marshes stretched westward toward the horizon. He said:

"He was lak' that, him, yes?"

McConnell chuckled. "Combination of Don Juan and Cassanova, to hear him tell it. My personal opinion is that much of it was pure balloon juice."

"It is mos' strange he's knock himself off jus' when the estate is about to be settle'," Henry remarked.

"You can say that again," Pinky conceded. "Not that he'd have got much—a ten-thousand-dollar bequest, in addition to the life income he drew from the plantation. He'd probably have run through the ten thousand in a week, and been back bothering the life out of Charley Ferrier for more money. Or writing bum checks for Charley to settle."

"Charlee Ferrier, he is manager of the estate, yes?"

"Administrator," Pinky corrected. "Until Estelle marries."

"And yo' tak' over as her hosban', yes?" Henry intimated.

McCONNELL shook his head. "I'm not sure I want any part of managing a sugar estate. That's a specialty. Anyway, my contract with the Mid-Continent people won't expire until next year."

"Estelle, she gets everything, yes?" Henry probed.

"That's right. Her cousins, Henriette, Heloise and Dominique Voisin were to get ten thousand apiece, with a life income from the profits of the plantation."

Henry slowed the jalopy as they approached the North Drawbridge, which marked the southern environs of Sellierville. As the old car clattered across the span, he noticed a jeep drawn up beside the road beyond the farther end of the bridge. A few yards from the jeep, a tall, gangling young man was pouring a white substance from a can into some tire marks on the shoulder of the road.

"What's that guy doing?" Pinky asked. "Isn't he a deputy?"

"*Mais oui,*" Henry drawled. "Andre Zhockson Fortier, in pusson, him." He added with a chuckle. "He is also name' 'Ol' Hickoree.' Yes."

Pinky grinned. "Andrew Jackson Fortier —Old Hickory! That's a natural. But what's he doing?"

Henry let the jalopy roll to a stop beside the jeep. Opening the door, he stepped out.

"*Comment ce va?*" he greeted.

Andrew Jackson Fortier, another of Sheriff Vicou's multitudinous relatives, favored Henry with a challenging stare. Despite his nickname, he wasn't more than twenty-two, a tall, gangling youngster, with a lean, sallow face, a large nose and protruding buck teeth. As if to prove himself a man of the world, he ignored Henry's greeting and declared in what he obviously believed to be the King's English:

"I mak' plaster cast' from the tire' of that car w'at Dominique Voisin he was throw' out from. Yes."

"So?" Henry fondled his handlebar mustache and regarded the young deputy with skeptical dark eyes. Standing face to face, they made an odd contrast: Fortier, tall and lanky in khaki shirt and trousers and high-laced boots; Henry, short and compact and neat as a new pin in a summer police uniform set off by a glistening Sam Browne belt with cartridge loops in front, and with a holstered .45 dangling at the right side.

"This," Henry drawled, "is news to me. The D. A. said Voisin had committed suicide."

"Suicide nothin'!" Fortier snorted. "Man, I'm tell yo' that wan he was kill' wit' car gas an' throw' in the bya. Yes."

HENRY stared thoughtfully at the plaster-filled wheel tracks. He said, "Gas? Yo' mean gazzoleen, yes?"

"I'm not mean gazzoleen, no," the other stated dogmatically. "I'm mean gas from the car engine—" He lost his weak hold on the English language and began to flounder. *"Il me faut un mot."*

"Je connais," Henry helped out in French. "You need not one word, *mon ami,* but two —carbon monoxide. *Eh bien.* So you think Voisin was murdered by the administration of carbon monoxide gas and his body thrown into the bayou, yes?"

"Not in the water, Capitaine Henri," Fortier sounded more conciliatory now. "Of a certainty, someone pushed him out of a car here, and his body landed on the batture, which is exposed because the bayou is low. At first it was believed that he had fallen into the bayou higher up and his body drifted down here. But his clothing wasn't even damp, and there was no water in the lungs.

"The medical examiner discovered that death had been caused by carbon monoxide poisoning. Yes." He paused, lifted his dusty ten-gallon hat and brushed a lock of lank, black hair from his moist forehead.

"And then?" Henry prompted.

"I investigated and discovered that Voisin had been thrown out of Ray Duclos' bar last night about ten o'clock. Lou Bourgeois, one of the city cops, saw him get into a black Ford coupe driven by Willie Campion. That was the last time he was seen alive."

"So, you arrested Willie Campion, yes?" Henry prompted.

"Mais oui. M'sieu' Fontenette is now questioning him. He added defensively, "The sheriff has turned the case over to me."

Henry smiled. *"Mes felicitations!"* He climbed back into his car and stepped on the starter, producing a racket that suggested a steel barrel half-filled with loose junk being rolled over cobblestones.

HE DROVE on in thoughtful silence until they passed the corporate limits of Sellierville, which was immersed in the drowsy calm of a Sunday afternoon. Then he muttered, "Unbelievable—yes!"

"What is?" Pinky inquired. "Or am I butting into official business?"

"That species of camel thinks Willie Campion murdere' Dominique Voisin," Henry explained.

"Willie Campion? You don't mean the skinny, paddle-footed guy who keeps the newsstand next door to the Hotel Joffrion?"

"Skinny? Paddle-foot'? That describe' Willie hokay."

"He certainly doesn't look like a killer to me," Pinky declared.

"Nobody is a killer until he done kill' somebody," Henry pointed out. "Jus' the same, I don't think that wan he's kill anybody."

A few minutes later he stopped in front of the courthouse and let Pinky out. The geologist opened the rumble and took out a well-filled fish creel and an unjointed fishing rod. He said:

"Well, don't use the rubber hose too hard on Willie. And thanks for the lift."

Henry stepped out of his car, removed the key from the ignition and walked across the lawn to the courthouse. When he entered the sheriff's office, he found Alphonse Vicou, better known to a majority of the voters of Papillon Parish as "Coozan Al," pacing the floor with short, mincing steps, his hands clasped behind his back and a look of exasperation on his bony face.

As Henry entered, the sheriff piped impatiently, "Ha! You arrive, at last." He halted, flailed the air with his long arms and then pointed dramatically at a man who sat in a chair, flanked by two deputies. "Perhaps you can get something out of this specimen of a mouse!"

The "mouse" blinked at Henry through the lenses of his shell-rimmed bifocals and declared with dignified assurance:

"I have nothing to say, *Messieurs."*

Henry beamed in appreciation of the man's cultured French, which was so different from the "gumbo ya-ya" of the Cajan folks as to sound stilted. He asked:

"How did you happen to pick up Voisin in your car, Willie?"

"But I have no car, I never had a car, I have no wish to own a car. I cannot drive a car," the prisoner shot back, waving his hands in front of his face.

Henry pulled up a chair and sat down. Drawing a long, twisted stogie from his shirt pocket, he lit up, filling the office with an odor like that of burning rope. He watched Vicou mincing back and forth, walking as if his legs were loosely fastened at the ankles, his baggy, seersucker trousers, supported by brilliant red suspenders, flap-

ping like the contents of a full clothesline in a high wind, his head thrust forward on his skinny neck in a manner that suggested a horse pulling a heavy load uphill. The worthy sheriff was built like a bean pole, except for a slight "prosperity bulge" that gave him the appearance of carrying a small football tucked inside his waistband.

"Before I question Willie," Henry suggested, "I'd like to know what you have against him."

VICOU retreated behind his desk and sat down. Lifting a pencil from the blotter, he aimed it pistol-wise at the prisoner and squeaked resentfully. "Look, Voisin is thrown out of Ray Duclos' bar at ten o'clock last night, for being drunk and disorderly. He was seen by Lou Bourgeois, one of the city police, to get into a car driven by this Campion—a black Ford coupe.

"About eleven o'clock this morning, Emile Lanier, the bridge tender discovers Voisin's body lying among the weeds near Number Two bridge. When the body is brought in, Dr. Lavelle can find no trace of water in the lungs, but discovers that Voisin has died of carbon monoxide poisoning."

"Well, Willie?" Henry hitched his chair around to face the prisoner. "What's your answer?"

Willie Campion raised a long-fingered right hand and stroked the untidy brown mustache that sprouted below his long nose. His long, horse face registered quiet resentment as he declared:

"I have already given the sheriff the names of a number of people who can testify that I was in my place of business at ten o'clock last evening."

Henry looked questioningly at Vicou. "You checked on that, yes?"

"Fontenette is checking over the telephone," the sheriff explained.

"Then," Henry drawled, "let us postpone further questioning until Willie's alibi is either supported or discredited."

He tilted back in his chair and smiled reassuringly at the prisoner. Willie Campion, he reflected, was an odd specimen, not exactly queer, but just a bit eccentric. Certain uncharitable ones whispered that he was too stingy to keep himself properly attired, but wore castoffs donated by his brother, a prosperous New Orleans dentist. Since the brother was short and rotund, while Willie was fairly tall and skinny as a lath and, moreover, never bothered to have the gift clothing altered to his fit, he always looked like something out of a Hollywood comedy.

On this occasion, he wore a striped Palm Beach suit that was several seasons out of style, the coat of which was draped from his narrow, bony shoulders with a sort of bag-on-a-broomstick effect, while the legs of the trousers stopped a good four inches from his shoe tops, revealing a pair of skinny ankles sheathed in heather green socks. Completing this ensemble was a plain blue shirt combined with a bow tie that would, by contrast, have made Joseph's coat look like gunny-sacking. Add to this satorial melange a pair of incredibly flat feet, which caused him to walk with a painful, knock-kneed shuffle, and it was at once plain why Willie Campion was pointed out as one of Sellierville's "men of distinction."

Albert Fontenette bustled in, his false teeth bared in a benign smile.

"Everything is all right, *mon ami.*" He beamed at the prisoner. "You are free to go. No hard feelings, we trust?"

Willie Campion stared owlishly through the upper segments of his bifocals and declared mildly, "Unless one considers a very natural aversion to being called a species of mouse, I entertain no hard feelings."

He lifted from the floor one of those iron-hard straw hats which, for some obscure reason, are called "sailors," placed it primly on his head and shuffled from the room.

Fontenette walked over to the settee between the two windows and sat down facing Henry. He was a short, dapper man in a white linen suit, with small, alert brown eyes in a sallow, wrinkled face, and with a mop of snowy hair that gave his head the appearance of a ripe cotton boll. He sucked in his false teeth preparatory to speaking and declared:

"I called you here because Dominique Voisin was murdered."

"You are certain he was murdered, yes?" Henry queried.

"Well—a man doesn't inhale carbon monoxide and then jump into the bayou."

Henry shrugged. "Obviously no. You had this Dominique Voisin's clothing searched, yes?"

Vicou grunted sourly, "Someone saved us

the trouble. All his pockets were turned wrong side out. Yes."

Henry rose and dropped the butt of his stogie into the cuspidor beside the sheriff's desk. "Let us make a search," he suggested. "Perhaps something may have been overlooked."

Leaving the office, they crossed the square to Stacy's Funeral Home, where Henry first viewed the body, which was that of a slender man of medium height, with dark hair and eyes, a short nose and not much chin, which gave to his face a puckish expression.

"So that's what's left of Dominique Voisin," he said musingly. "I recall seeing him around town a time or two. Any marks of violence?"

"Not a mark," Fontenette assured him. He turned to the attendant. "We wish to see his clothing."

THE man brought the garments draped on a wire hanger. Henry sat down and examined them with minute care. At the end of fifteen minutes, he declared disappointedly:

"Someone of a great thoroughness was ahead of us. Yes."

He stooped and picked up the dead man's cravat, which had fallen on the floor. He was about to replace it on the hanger when he felt something in the lining. Stripping back the silk, he exposed a small fold of buff-colored paper.

"Ah!" he murmured. "What have we here?"

Vicou and Fontenette leaned over him and breathed down the back of his neck as they watched him unfold the paper, which proved to be a check drawn on the Ivernia Bank, of New Orleans.

Henry read aloud: "Pay to the order of Dominique Voisin fifty thousand dollars and no one-hundredths. Signed, Cyril Waldrup." He looked at Vicou. "You know that one, yes?"

The sheriff and the D. A. exchanged glances and shook their heads. Then Vicou buttonholed the attendant and asked in English:

"You know a feller 'roun' these parts name of Waldrup, yes?"

The man chuckled. "If I ever heard a moniker like that, I wouldn't be apt to forget it. But I never did." He peered over Henry's shoulder at the face of the check. "Fifty thousand bucks! Wow! What a sportin' gent like me could do with all that jack!"

Henry smiled and indicated an almost illegible notation in pencil on the margin of the check. "Yo' couldn't do much wit' this," he pointed out. "She's phony. That mark means Waldrup ain't got him that kinda money. No."

He turned the check over, noticed several lines of writing on the reverse side. "Something else, yes. Listen to this: 'In payment for one year's option on the mineral rights in the Voisin plantation known as Three Oaks, Papillon Parish, La., said option to extend from July 31, 1947, to July 30, 1948. Signed, Dominique Voisin.' "

"But," Fontenette spluttered, "Dominique had no right to sell anything pertaining to the Voisin property, as he had only a life income from the estate." He paused, as if a horrible thought had suddenly occurred to him. "And only fifty thousand for mineral rights that must be worth millions!"

Henry chuckled. "One begins to detect a strong odor of fish. *Mais oui.*"

"That check," Vicou scoffed, "may not mean a thing."

"Why then," Henry asked, "did Voisin conceal it inside his necktie? And why did some person or persons unknown to us turn his pockets wrong side out? Obviously, this check is important to someone."

HENRY studied the check again and noticed that the writing above Voisin's signature on the reverse side was different. He said:

"Obviously, three persons had to do with this check. The writing on the face is evidently that of Waldrup, since it matches the signature. But this above Voisin's endorsement was written by a third person."

He handed the check to the D. A., who studied it for several minutes, then nodded and returned it to Henry, who folded it and tucked it in his shirt pocket.

"These three handwritings," Fontenette said reflectively, "suggests that Voisin and one other attempted to defraud Waldrup, who discovered the fraud in time to stop payment."

"It might also suggest," Henry pointed out, "that Voisin was tricked, while drunk, into putting his endorsement on the check far enough from the top so that the option

clause could have been written afterward, and without his knowledge."

The D. A. nodded sagely. "You may have something there, *mon vieux*. Voisin may have learned that he had been tricked and hid the check inside his necktie, with the intention of using it to blackmail one of the others, probably Waldrup, who followed him here and murdered him in an attempt to recover it."

Henry shrugged. "So far, we have no concrete evidence of murder," he declared, adding, "I don't like this place. Let's get out."

Outside, on the banquette, Fontenette observed, "This is Sunday, supposedly a day of rest. I'm going home. *Au 'voir!*" He walked across the street toward his parked car. Vicou grinned at Henry and added, "Me, too. See you in the morning." He minced up the street, leaving Henry standing in front of Stacy's.

Darkness had fallen, and Sellierville was shedding its sabbath lethargy. Neon signs were dotting the faces of the buildings surrounding the square with splashes of technicolor that competed with the myriad fireflies flitting among the branches of the trees bordering the courthouse lawn. The blare of jukeboxes was erupting from the various establishments designated "bar and grill," and spicy odors of Cajan cookery were wafting from the numerous eating places and blending with the night scents of fuscata and oleander and jasmine and the musky, ever-present tang of rich, moist earth. At the intersection of Courthouse Square and Beauregard Avenue a perspiring city cop was striving heroically to keep traffic from becoming snarled by the quaint local custom of stopping one's car in the middle of the block to exchange felicitations with one's pedestrian friends.

Henry decided to remain in Sellierville for the night, as his car was too temperamental for night driving. He next thought about supper. Turning, he walked toward the levee and finally entered a small, shabby-looking restaurant bearing the flamboyant designation: "LE CHAT D'OR."

Why this down-at-the-heels place had ever been named the Golden Cat, Henry had never learned. He knew, however, that in this low-ceilinged dining room, the air of which was blue with tobacco smoke and heavy with the odors of fried shrimp and garlic-scented cooking oil, he could obtain a meal which, in sheer culinary artistry, could equal anything provided by New Orleans' master chefs.

SEATING himself at a small, oilcloth-covered table, he ordered a thick steak, well rubbed with garlic, soused in cooking oil and broiled over charcoal. Also a dish of shoestring potatoes, croissants with butter, a slice of apple pie with cheese, and a liqueur with the coffee. Since he was putting the bill on the expense account, he could safely let himself out a few notches.

One hour later he strolled back toward the square, filled with that particular satisfaction which comes only with an excellent meal. At peace with the world, he drew contentedly on his stogie, the smoke of which trailed behind him like smoke from the funnel of a coal-burning steamer. As he approached the Hotel Joffrion, he saw Pinky McConnell seated on a bench beneath the banquette awning, an eye-arresting figure in a suit of blue tropical weave, his red hair clinging to his well-shaped head like a gleaming copper helmet. He was sitting beside a man in mud-spotted seersucker, a tall, slender man with rimless pince-nez perched on the bridge of his long, slender nose, below which was a tight-lipped, humorless mouth.

"Ah!" Pinky looked up, grinning as he recognized Henry. "Come over here and sit with the riff-raff." Indicating his long-faced companion, he added, "You know Mr. Ferrier, I presume?"

Henry knew Charley Ferrier only by sight. He said, "Please 'to meet yo'." Then he sat down beside Pinky and accepted a cigar from the red-haired geologist, who inquired:

"How did Willie Campion stand up to the third degree?"

"There wasn't no third degree," Henry corrected. "Willie, he had him an iron-clad alibi."

Ferrier said, "I'd like to know more about Mr. Voisin's death. I tried to contact the sheriff, but without success. And the people in the undertaker's don't seem to know anything."

Henry studied Ferrier through the smoke of his cigar, secretly pleased at this chance

meeting with the man who controlled the Voisin estate. "I thought mos' everybody knew all about him being found in the bya," he drawled.

Ferrier explained, pointing toward a mud-spattered car parked in front of the hotel, "I only arrived here about three-quarters of an hour ago, from Baton Rouge. Mr. McConnell has just been telling me about Dominique."

Henry glanced at the muddy car and said irrelevantly, "That drought, she mus' have broken at las', yes?"

"I ran into a downpour this side of New Orleans," Ferrier said. "Right afterward, I had a flat and had to take a splashing from every passing car until I got the spare in place. But what about Mr. Voisin?"

"They ain't much to it," Henry admitted. He told the other of the discovery of Voisin's body on the batture, and of the medical examiner's subsequent findings.

"Mind telling me your opinion?" Ferrier asked.

Henry shrugged. "It might have bin suicide. Yo' know if he was chasing after some woman?"

"I really couldn't say," Ferrier declared slowly. "I knew very little about his private life, as he spent most of his time in the city."

"Yo' know of a feller name of Waldrup?"

Ferrier squinted through his pince-nez and stroked his long, pointed chin. "Waldrup?" he muttered. "No, don't believe I ever heard that name before. Is he—er—involved in Mr. Voisin's death?"

"We don't know," Henry admitted. "He wrote Voisin a bum check fo' fifty thousan' dollars." He took the check from his shirt pocket and handed it to Ferrier. "We foun' this inside Voisin's necktie."

FERRIER squinted at the check, turned it over and read the writing on the reverse side. "Well, I'll be damned!" Henry heard him mutter. Aloud, he said, "This is the most preposterous nonsense I ever heard of. Dominique had nothing to sell."

"That," Henry drawled, "is w'at mak' it so interesting. Yes."

Ferrier pouted. "Seems to me it's just another of Dominique's silly practical jokes."

"That's what I've been thinking," Pinky supported. He explained to Henry. "Dominique always was something of a screwball, all the time trying to get the laugh on someone."

Henry grinned. "Seem lak' the joke was on him, this tam'. Yes."

Ferrier glanced at his watch and rose. "Sorry to leave this bull session," he apologized. "But I've got to see about having my car washed for tomorrow. But first, I want to get a bite of supper before they close the dining room. *Au 'voir!*" He entered the hotel lobby and headed toward the restaurant.

Henry and Pinky talked on, mostly about Three Oaks, and of old Claude Voisin's determination to keep oil development off his property.

"That was a foolish point of view," Pinky explained, "because one of the bad features of the oil game is that when your neighbor starts drilling, you must drill, too, or have the oil drained out from under your land. Luckily, no one, as yet, has started drilling operations within miles of the Voisin property."

During the conversation, Henry learned much Voisin family history. Claude Voisin had inherited the plantation from his father, old Dominique, the grandfather of the Dominique Voisin who now lay on a slab in Stacy's Funeral Home down the block. Old Dominique had distrusted his elder son, Etienne, the father of the younger Dominique and had forced him to relinquish his rights in the plantation in return for a life income for himself and his three children. Claude, the father of Estelle, had before his death made a will, leaving the plantation to his daughter, and adding a legacy of ten thousand dollars to the life incomes of the younger Dominique and his two sisters, Heloise and Henriette.

"So," Pinky summed up, "that's how matters stand. Dominique had no rights in Three Oaks, and in trying to dispose of any rights he was guilty of fraud. Gosh, they certainly won't like to hear about this at Three Oaks. They're a stiff-necked crowd, those Voisin women."

At ten o'clock Henry took his leave of the red-haired geologist and went for a stroll around the square while he made up his mind whether to take a room at the hotel or to spend the night on the settee in Vicou's

office. Deciding upon the latter course, he stood for the next fifteen minutes at the junction of Beauregard Avenue and watched the dwindling traffic. Finally he crossed over to the courthouse and ascended the stairs to the upper floor, his footfalls ringing hollowly through the deserted building.

Reaching the upstairs corridor, he groped his way through the darkened passage toward the door of the sheriff's office. As he passed a short, cross hallway, he heard a board creak. The next instant something that felt like a bag of wet cement landed on the crown of his hat and forced it down over his eyes. Before he could rid himself of the blindfolding hat, a second blow landed on his right shoulder and knocked him face downward to the floor.

HENRY wasn't even stunned, although his right side felt paralyzed. He lay still, for the moment unable to move, vaguely aware that the bandanna wadded inside the crown of his hat had cushioned the blow on his head. His right arm lay along his side, his hand almost touching the butt of his six-shooter. But try as he might, he couldn't force himself to draw the weapon from its holster.

Several minutes passed. Somewhere in the darkness above him, Henry could hear the quick, nervous breathing of his assailant. Then a floorboard creaked. Clothing rustled softly. Hands grasped him by shoulder and hip and flipped him roughly over on his back.

Now Henry could see above him, dimly silhouetted against the white ceiling, the head and shoulders of a man, the lower half of whose face was concealed beneath a bandanna. Henry made a desperate effort to draw his pistol, but was still unable to move his right arm. He tried his left, discovered that it worked.

The unknown was trying to unbutton the flap of Henry's shirt pocket when Henry's left fist thudded with the disruptive force of a mule kick into the pit of the man's stomach. The stranger reeled backward, sat down with a bone-shaking jar. In an instant he was up and running along the corridor toward the stairs, down which he plunged to the lobby.

Henry scrambled painfully to his feet. Being waylaid in a courthouse corridor was a new experience for him, and he wanted to learn the stranger's reason for such unseemly behavior. He reached the stair head just in time to see the other bounding off the bottom step.

"*Arretez*—halt!" Henry bellowed.

The stranger swung about, flung up his left hand. Tiny pinpoints of flame flickered in the darkness, while the building echoed to the evenly spaced reports of a light-caliber six-shooter.

Instinctively, Henry ducked below the banister rail, aware that the white wall at his back made him a perfect target in the darkness. He tried to draw his gun, but his right arm was still useless. He was endeavoring to ease the long-barrelled weapon from its holster with his left hand when he heard the sudden, metallic click of the stranger's pistol and realized that it was now empty.

"Ha!" Henry boomed triumphantly. "Now we shall see, ma frien'."

He plunged down the stairs, satisfied that his one good arm would be sufficient for his purpose. He was halfway down the steps when the stranger darted through the entrance door and fled into the night. When Henry barged after him a second or two later, the man was nowhere to be seen.

Henry looked angrily across toward the south and east sides of the square. People were pouring out of the theaters and starting leisurely homeward. There was no excitement, no hurry. And there was no sign of a running man.

Henry made a circuit of the building, peering among the foundation shrubbery and into isolated clumps of oleander and fuscata and crepe myrtle. Finally, satisfied that his quarry must have fled around the courthouse to the dimly lighted west side, crossed over and mingled with the homegoing crowds, he re-entered the building and climbed to the second floor.

Henry seldom allowed himself to become angry. But he was furious when he entered the sheriff's office and locked the door. Surmising the reason for the attack, he felt in his shirt pocket to assure himself that the check was still in his possession. He no longer entertained any doubt that Dominique Voisin had been murdered in an effort to obtain the apparently worthless slip of paper. And he didn't propose that he, too, should die for it. In the morning, he de-

cided, he would hand it over to the D. A. for safe keeping.

Aside from himself, five men knew about the check. Eliminating Vicou and Fontenette, there remained Pinky McConnell, Charley Ferrier and the mortuary attendant in Stacy's. As yet, Henry couldn't figure out a clear-cut reason for either Pinky or Ferrier wanting to obtain possession of the check. There might still be a fourth man—the actual murderer of Voisin—the same person who had made the attack upon himself in the corridor. The mortuary attendant might have talked freely in any one of the bars around the square; he seemed to be the kind who would try to impress others by pretending to have inside knowledge. The killer might have heard the fellow brag and, accordingly, had made his plans.

Meanwhile, Henry's mind was still open. While his regard for Pinky McConnell veered between downright friendliness and a vast respect for the red-haired young man's erudition, Henry's feeling for Ferrier bordered on active dislike, for there was something about the lawyer's distant manner that rubbed him the wrong way. But Henry was too cagey to permit his feelings to cloud his judgment. He resolved to await further developments, for his instinct warned him that the murderer of Voisin would make another attempt to get possession of the check.

Removing his shoes, shirt and trousers, and draping his Sam Browne belt on the back of a chair, he stretched out on the settee and was soon asleep.

The drowsy twitterings of a family of mockingbirds in a tree outside the window of the sheriff's office awakened him shortly before dawn. Rising, he went to the washroom, stripped off his underwear and sluiced his body from head to foot with cold water. Except for a slight stiffness in his right arm and shoulder, there was little to remind him of the previous night's adventure.

At six o'clock a boy pushed a New Orleans paper over the transom. Henry sat down at the sheriff's desk and read the paper through. Then he dressed, left the office and crossed the square to Alcee Trinchard's barber shop for a shave and a shoe shine, after which he walked to the Golden Cat for a breakfast of fried eggs, sausage and fried grits, with several cups of strong, black coffee.

After breakfast, he strolled back to the courthouse square and paused at the bus station to watch a few passengers disembark from the southbound bus. There were only four passengers this morning, all male. The first to alight was a stocky, middle-aged man, with gold-framed spectacles straddling a short-beaked nose which jutted from a face the color of a newly baked brick. Accompanied by a younger man, whom Henry recognized as an oil scout, with an office in the Lejeune Block, he hurried toward the Hotel Joffrion.

The other two passengers brought a twinkle of interest to Henry's dark eyes, for they were beefy, ponderous men, with feet that would have spelled copper in any language. Wondering why they were in town, Henry moved unobtrusively in their wake as they, too, headed toward the hotel. He stood outside the dining room and watched each man put away a breakfast that would have fortified an elephant. Finally, they left the restaurant and crossed the square to the courthouse, with Henry trailing a dozen yards behind. When he entered the vestibule, the pair were seated on a hard wooden bench outside the tax assessor's office.

"Goo' mo'ning, gentlemen!" Henry greeted. "W'at can we do fo' y'all this fine day, *hein?*"

"You the sheriff?" the larger of the pair inquired with a bored air. He was a big man, heavy-jowled and thick-necked, with a large, round face, a skin like horsehide and suspicious little gray eyes. "If y'are, we can do business right now."

"I," Henry introduced himself, "am chief investigator fo' the distric' atto'ney's office. The name is Pou. Yes."

"Henson, detective-sergeant, New Orleans Police Department," the big man responded. He indicated his smaller companion. "Detective Kelly."

The three shook hands solemnly. Then Henry asked, "Y'all have beezness wit' the sheriff, yes?"

Kelly extracted a legal-looking paper from his inside coat pocket. He was the younger of the pair, with wisely suspicious blue eyes, a short, pug nose and a wide, humorous mouth. He glanced at the paper, which Henry recognized as an arrest warrant, and declared:

"We're lookin' for a character name of Voysin—"

"Vwah-seen," Henson corrected.

"Okay," Kelly grunted. "So it's Vwah-seen. Anyway, we want him on suspicion of murder."

"So?" Henry murmured politely. "Who that Voisin kill?"

"He bumped off—" again Detective Kelly referred to the arrest warrant— "a guy name o' Waldrup—Cyril Waldrup."

HENRY turned to hide an expression of surprise and stared at a Negro janitor who was industriously wielding a mop a few yards away. He suggested:

"Let us go opstair' to the sheriff's office. It is mo' comfo'table there. Yes."

He ushered them upstairs, seated them in comfortable chairs and dispensed cigars from the sheriff's humidor. Then he sat down on the settee and inquired:

"Now yo' tell me how that Voisin, he's happen to knock off that Waldrup."

Henson lolled comfortably back in his chair and closed his eyes, his cigar clamped between his teeth and aimed at the ceiling. He drawled lazily: "You tell him, Kelly."

"Accordin' to the M. E.," the junior dick began, "Waldrup was killed some time between six and seven o'clock on Friday evenin', last. He was shot twice through the heart with a twenty-five-caliber automatic. We've got the bullets.

"At first, we figured some dame knocked him off, on account of dames favorin' junior-size rods, so they can carry 'em in their handbags. Waldrup was killed while settin' behind his desk in Room 402, Gremillon Building. As there was no sign of a struggle, it looked like somebody he knew an' trusted had rodded him out." He paused and flicked the ash off his cigar with his little finger.

"That," Henry drawled, "is mos' interesting. But how y'all figure Voisin kill' that wan?"

"Easy," Kelly assured him with a superior smile. "We flap our feet around and ask the usual questions. Pretty soon we come up with a bellhop who tells us Waldrup and Voisin and another guy name of—" he paused to refer to his notebook—"guy name of Campion, had bin puttin' on a hoochfest in Waldrup's hotel room last Wednesday night. Well, we took it from there.

"Next, the cop on duty in the Ivernia Bank reports a guy name of Voisin gettin' the old heave-ho out of the bank on Friday forenoon, about eleven o'clock. Seems he had a check for fifty thousand bucks, given him by this Waldrup, who didn't have that kinda money. When the teller tips Voisin the check's pure rubber, Voisin gets sore and starts to take the joint apart. So the cop—name of Bates—clamped the old come-along on him and led him outside."

"So," Henry mused, "y'all figure Voisin he kills Waldrup because Waldrup gives him a bum check, yes?"

HENSEN grunted and heaved himself upright in his chair. "It's a natural," he declared defensively. Bates claims this Voisin guy was pickled to the gills. He'd a' run him in, only he knew the bank people didn't like that kinda publicity. So he just walks Voisin outside an' turns him loose.

"Well, you can figure Voisin walkin' around, stoppin' in at some joint once in a while for a little elbow-bendin' exercise, gettin' drunker—an' madder—all the time; chewin' on the fact that Waldrup had slipped him a phony. So he winds up by goin' to Waldrup's office an' pluggin' him."

Henry said, "Soun's mos' reasonable. Yes."

"You know where we can locate him?" Kelly asked eagerly. "Of course, we'd like you guys to help make the pinch, just for the local record, y'know."

"Me, I would be mos' happy to cooperate," Henry said. "But the fact is, *messieurs*, that Voisin he is no longer wit' us."

"Skeeped out, eh?" Henson grunted.

"Meestaire Voisin," Henry declared slowly, "he is daid. Yes."

"Dead?" the pair echoed.

"Thass right—murdered," Henry revealed. He then told them of the discovery of Voisin's body the previous day.

Aw, nuts!" Henson growled. "We thought we had this dam' case all sewed up."

Henry grinned at the moon-faced city dick. "Yo' case she's done come onstuck. Yes. What y'all fin' out about that man Campion?"

"Oh, him!" Henson grunted. "He just seems to have disappeared into thin air. Probably lammed outa town when he found out about Waldrup gettin' shot."

"Yo' got his description, yes?"

"Sure," Kelly volunteered. "Funny-look-

in' geezer. Kinda skinny. Mustache an' shell-rimmed glasses. Bellhop said he looked like a dressed-up hick."

"So?" Henry had to turn his head to keep the others from noticing the surprise that showed for an instant on his broad face. The description fitted Willie Campion like a rubber glove. Yet, Henry doubted that the eccentric newsdealer had been out of Sellierville in months. "This beezness," he murmured, "she's begin to smell mo' and mo' lak' a long-daid fish. Yes."

"What d'you mean?" Henson challenged.

Henry's answer was prevented by the entrance of Fontenette and Vicou. Henry introduced the two city dicks, after which Kelly told their story once more. When he described Willie Campion, the D. A. started, sucked in his false teeth, preparatory to speaking, but stopped when he caught Henry's wink of warning.

To steer the talk away from Willie Campion, Henry suggested:

"Reckon ya'll got to view the body befo' leaving, yes?"

"Right." Henson heaved himself out of his chair. "Let's get it over with an' catch the next bus out. This hick towns gimme the weeps."

Henry led them across to Stacy's, where they viewed the body of Dominique Voisin, after which they left for the bus station. Henry then retraced his steps to the courthouse. He had no desire to witness the inquest, for he knew what the verdict would be.

When he reentered Vicou's office, the sheriff, who was now alone, asked, "Why did you warn the D. A. against talking about Willie Campion?"

Henry grinned. "You wouldn't ask that question if you could visualize what those elephants would do to him. They'd give him the works. When those city cops got to work on Willie with rubber hose and a pair of pliers they could make him confess to skinning his grandmother alive and boiling her in oil. *Mais oui.*"

He helped himself to another of the sheriff's cigars, sat down on the settee and told Vicou about the attack upon himself the night before.

"Right here in the courthouse!" Vicou squeaked. "What will happen next?"

Fontenette came in, bringing with him the stocky, bespectacled man whom Henry had seen disembarking from the New Orleans bus a while before. Behind them came the man's younger companion.

"I want you to meet Sheriff Vicou," the D. A. presented the newcomers. "Also Captain Henry Pou, our chief investigator. Gentlemen, Mr. Denn, and Mr. Shippey."

The bespectacled stranger declared in a flat, Mid-Western voice: "D-E-Double-N—Denn." He sat down in a chair indicated by the sheriff, hitched it around to face Henry and announced, "I've bin hornswoggled."

Henry looked blankly at Fontenette; the word "hornswoggled" wasn't included in his lexicon. The D. A. smiled, sucked in his teeth and explained:

"He means he's been swindled."

"Swindled is right," Mr. Denn confirmed loudly. "Taken for a sucker—hornswoggled. It's all the same."

Henry sized him up, noting the short, beaked nose, the jutting chin, and the blue-gray eyes peering in angry frustration through the lenses of his spectacles, and concluded that Mr. Denn wasn't the type of person who would tamely submit to being hornswoggled. For a moment Henry said nothing. In his mind, he was scrutinizing this fascinating new word, entranced with its mouth-filling syllables.

"Ho'nswoggle'," he murmured. *"Ma foi!"*

"I'll tell the world," Mr. Denn asserted. "Hornswoggled is the right word. There ain't another dam' word in the dictionary that'll describe the way I was taken to the cleaner like that one."

"Tell him how it happened, Mr. Denn," the D. A. encouraged, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

Mr. Denn leaned toward Henry. "Here's how it was: Up in New Orleens last week, a fellow propositions me about this Voisin deal. He had all the necessary papers to make it look strictly legitimate. So I snaps him up on it, and paid him eighty thousand dollars for a one-year option. Well, this morning I leave New Orleens and come down here to register my option on the county—I mean parish—books. First off, though, I figure I oughta look up this Ferrier guy, who is administrator for the property. But he ain't in his office. So I comes back to

the courthouse, where the young feller in the land office tells me I'm all wet."

"Tell me," Henry suggested, "from whom yo' bought that option?"

"I bought it," Mr. Denn stated, "from a feller name of Waldrup, who bought it from Dominique Voisin, himself."

HENRY stared in silence at the angry Mid-Westerner, slowly realizing the significance of the man's admission. Astonished by the red-faced man's frankness, he exclaimed:

"Yo' admit buying that option from Waldrup? Yo' know w'at that means, yes?"

"Why not?" Denn argued. "Option deals like that are handled every day in my business. How was I to know Waldrup was playin' me for a sucker?"

Fontenette sat down beside Henry on the settee and warned in French, "Best go easy on him, as he seems to be the innocent third party in this swindle." He smiled apologetically at Denn and added in English, "Please let us have those papers again."

Denn extracted a sheaf of legal-looking papers from the inside pocket of his seersucker coat and thrust them at the D. A. "There y'are," he growled. "Legal-lookin' as all get-out, and not worth a whoop in hell."

Fontenette removed the rubber band holding the papers together and spread one on his knee. "This," he explained to Henry, "is a photostatic copy of a power-of-attorney allegedly granted to Dominique Voisin by Estelle Voisin, and countersigned by Charles Ferrier, as administrator. You'll notice it is notarized by Sam Larcade, and dated on July Seventeenth, last."

Henry studied the photostat with interest. He said, "This would mak' legal the sale of that wan-year option, yes?"

Fontenette nodded. "That is, unless it is proved to be a forgery, which I strongly suspect."

Spreading the second paper, he continued. "This is a transfer of a one-year option on the mineral rights in Three Oaks from Dominique Voisin to Cyril Waldrup, dated July Twenty-fourth, last, and notarized by Emile Landry, a New Orleans notary public.

Unfolding the third paper, he resumed, "This last is a transfer of the same option from Cyril Waldrup to Elmer B. Denn, dated July Twenty-fifth, which was last Friday. It, also, is notarized by Emile Landry."

Vicou came around from behind his desk, picked up the photostat from the settee and regarded it with skeptical eyes. "That Sam Larcade," he piped, "he's know mo' about lan' deals in this parish than any wan else. He'd know if it's a fo'gery. Yes."

"That's right," Denn's companion spoke up. "Why not get him up here and ask him about it?"

Vicou stepped to his desk, picked up the telephone and called a number. Presently, he spoke in French. "Sam? Vicou speaking. Can you come over to my office at once? It's important. *Tres bien.*"

He cradled the telephone and announced, "He'll be here in a few minutes."

Henry looked appraisingly at Shippey, who appeared to be about thirty-five, with slim shoulders, but with the look of the outdoor man. He had a narrow, lantern-jawed face, deeply set gray eyes and a wide, loose-lipped mouth.

He returned Henry's scrutiny with a loose-lipped grin and asked, "What's on your mind?"

"Jus' wondering, me, where yo' fit in the beezness," Henry replied.

Shippey pushed a lock of brown hair back from his forehead and chuckled. "I don't fit in, thank goodness," he declared. "I ran into Mr. Denn on the bus coming south from the city, where I'd gone Saturday for a conference with the company I work for."

Denn peered at Henry over the tips of his spectacle frames. "Don't go to gettin' ideas about him, Chief," he warned. "He ain't got nothin' to do with this hornswogglin' business. He just steered me up here, figurin' the D. A. might know some way for me to get my money back."

"One presumes," Henry drawled, "that yo', too, are in the beezness of buying and selling oil leases, yes?"

"Sometimes," Mr. Denn confirmed. "Whenever I spot a good thing."

Sam Larcade bustled in, a dapper, little man, with dancing brown eyes in a hatchet face.

"Bo' jou', messieurs!" he greeted. *"Comment allez vous?"* Without waiting for an answer, he added an explosive "Yes, sir!"

"I want you to meet Mr. Denn, Mr. Larcade," the D. A. introduced them. When

the pair had shaken hands, he waved the little lawyer to a chair and handed him the photostat. "Take a look at this and give me your opinion," he requested.

Larcade clamped pince-nez on the bridge of his nose, looked at the photostat, then removed his glasses, polished them briskly and set them in place again. As he studied the document, his face began to register incredulous surprise. Presently he declared:

"My opinion of this wouldn't be printable. It's an outright forgery."

"How, then," the D. A. probed, "do you account for its being stamped with your seal?"

"It's my seal, all right," Larcade admitted. "My old one. Someone swiped it from my office about two weeks ago, and I had to send up to New Orleans for a new one. It's my old seal, sure enough, because I recognize an imperfection in one of the letters. But the signature under the seal isn't mine, although I must say it's a fair imitation."

"You're sure of that, Mister?" Denn queried anxiously.

"Positively, sir," the lawyer declared. "This imitation of my signature suggests that the other signatures also are forgeries."

"Eighty thousand dollars gone to hell!" Denn groaned. "The fraternity will never let me hear the end of that."

"If it is a fo'gery, lak' Larcade says," Henry put in, "the impo'tant question is who done it?" He looked searchingly at Denn. "How long yo' know that Waldrup, you?"

"Known Cy for years," Denn confessed. "He's well known in the lease game. Only a few months ago he picked up a couple of promisin' locations for us over in Mississippi."

"How yo' happen to mak' this deal wit' him?" Henry asked.

MR. DENN scratched the point of his prominent chin and squinted thoughtfully at the ceiling. "Tuesday night, last, I think it was, I ran into Cy on Canal Street, an' he propositioned me about takin' a one-year option on the Voisin property. Said he could get all mineral rights. Well, gents, I tell you that was somethin' every oil man in this section has bin tryin' to get his hands on for years—the Voisin property, I mean. Cy claimed Voisin needed some quick money to pay off a gamblin' debt an' was willin' to be reasonable.

"Well, I wouldn't give him a direct answer, one way or t'other until I had a talk over the phone with my partner. He said for me to go right ahead, if all the papers were in order. So I calls Cy at his hotel and told him we were interested. He came to my

hotel room Wednesday, an' showed me Dominique Voisin's power-of-attorney—the original, not the photostat. Well, that looked okay to me, so I told him to go ahead. He said the price would be eighty thousand. But considerin' the possibilities, I didn't think that was too much.

"He called up Friday mornin' an' said he's closed his end of the deal, an' for me to meet him in the office of Emile Landry at three o'clock to close our deal. He also asked me to pay off all in cash. Said he was goin' out on a scout Monday, an' wanted ready money to make a flash. I didn't think anything of that—not then, anyway, because most scouts carry a lot of ready money with them, as these Frenchmen hereabouts are suspicious of checks.

"I went to the Ivernia Bank and made arrangements for the money, all in one-hundred-dollar bills, with a list of the serial numbers. At three o'clock I went to the notary's office, carryin' the money in an overnight zipper bag. Waldrup was there on time. He showed me the papers. But when I found out he'd closed the deal with Voisin for fifty thousand, I kicked like a bay steer until he argued that he'd worked on Voisin for nearly two weeks, an' was entitled to somethin' for his trouble. Well, after thinkin' it over, I decided he was right. So I paid over the money, figurin' I was gettin' a one-year option on one of the richest oil properties in the South for eighty thousand dollars. I picked up my papers, said good-

bye to Waldrup and caught a bus for Alexandria. I ain't seen him since."

FONTENETTE folded the papers, snapped the rubber band about them and returned them to Denn. He said, "Not only have you been made the victim in a swindle, sir," he declared, "but you have become the chief suspect in a murder."

"Holy cat!" Mr. Denn almost popped out of his chair, then sat back and inquired breathlessly, "Who's bin murdered?"

"Waldrup," the D. A. revealed. "When you closed the deal with him, was he alone?"

"The last time, he was," Denn admitted. "But I saw him once in Antoine's with Voisin. He made us acquainted."

Fontenette ran his fingers through his silvery mop of hair and frowned in perplexity.

"I hardly know what to do about you," he admitted. "Legally, I'd be justified in holding you for the New Orleans police, unless you can prove to us that you weren't in New Orleans on last Friday evening, between six and seven o'clock."

Denn grinned with sudden confidence. "Mister," he confessed, "you sure had me buffaloed for a minute. Now I left New Orleans at exactly four o'clock. If you'll call Abe Sims, of McCartney and Sims, Throop Building, in Shreveport, he'll tell you we traveled together on the same bus. I got off at Alexandria, while Abe went on to Shreveport. But I stayed Saturday night at the Belmont. You can check on that."

Fontenette shrugged. "It isn't our place to take any action in the matter, as we have no venue. Orleans Parish has full jurisdiction, both in regard to the swindle and to the murder of Waldrup. However, it is our duty to hold you and notify the New Orleans police—"

"You mean you'd put me in jail?" Denn exclaimed, aghast at the thought.

The D. A. stared fixedly at the floor, obviously considering the possibility of a suit for false arrest. "I don't think that will be necessary," he declared finally, "if you'll promise not to leave town until the New Orleans police have had an opportunity to check on your alibi."

"I ain't thinkin' of leavin' town for a while, anyway," Denn said. "However, I reckon I oughta have a lawyer."

Sam Larcade rose and bowed. "May I offer my services," he suggested suavely.

"Guess you'll do," Denn agreed. "I'd like to go to your office for a private talk, if it's all right with these gents."

"It is quite all right," the D. A. consented.

"Okay." Denn heaved himself wearily to his feet. "Let's go, then."

He left the sheriff's office, followed by Larcade and Shippey.

Fontenette looked unhappily at Larcade's retreating back. When he heard them descending the stairs, he said musingly:

"I have a feeling that Larcade will prime Denn to enter suit against the Voisin estate."

"Ma foi!" Henry exclaimed doubtfully. "How could the Voisin estate be responsible for a swindle worked by that Waldrup?"

"Don't forget that Dominique seems to have been mixed up in it," the D. A. reminded him. "Legally, Denn hasn't a leg to stand on. But Estelle Voisin might be persuaded to make restitution, rather than permit Dominique to be branded as a common swindler. They're stiff-necked, those Voisins."

"Charley Ferrier wouldn't let them get away with anything like that," Vicou declared. "Why, it's blackmail."

"They could wait until Charley is relieved of his administratorship," the D. A. pointed out.

Andrew Jackson Fortier entered, holding tightly to the right arm of a woman, who struggled to free herself from his grip, while clinging with her left arm to a prodigious paper sack filled with groceries.

"Let go of me, you rabbit-faced punk!" she shrilled, as he propelled her across the threshold. "Take your hands off me."

Fortier shoved her into the chair recently vacated by Denn.

"Set down an' shet up, ontil the D. A. he's hear w'at I got to tell him," the deputy ordered.

"Nom d'un diable!" Fontenette laughed. "What is all this?"

Old Hickory straightened his shoulders and favored Henry with a triumphant leer. "Me, Andre Zhockson Fortier," he stated dramatically, "have discover' the car w'at Dominique Voisin he was throw' out from. "She—" he pointed an accusing finger at the woman—"Mamzelle Berthe Reynaud, she's own that car. Yes."

HENRY fondled his mustache, hiding behind his hand a smile of amusement at Fortier's dramatics, while he studied the woman with contemplative eyes. Every small town had at least one of Berthe Reynaud's type, women with no visible means of support, but with numerous male friends.

She no longer was young, and was beginning to bulge in the wrong places. Attired in a simple house dress, bobby socks and green sandals, she looked like any housewife on a quick trip to the neighborhood grocery.

Fontenette looked sternly at the woman. "What have you got to say about that?" he queried.

"I don't know what that buck-toothed moron is talking about," she retorted. "I drive in town for my week's supply of groceries. I park in front of the Hill store. When I come out, this punk comes up to me and asks if I own this car. When I say I do, he grabs me by the arm and gives me the bum's rush over here. Didn't even give me time enough to put my groceries in the car."

The D. A. turned inquiringly to Fortier. "All right, let's have it."

Old Hickory grinned confidently and took off his hat, from the crown of which he produced several five-by-eight photographic prints.

"These," he declared, "are pictures of them plaster cast' I made yesterday of them tire tracks out there w'ere the body of Dominique Voisin was discover'." He held one of the pictures up for the D. A.'s inspection and continued, "This is a picture of the casts of the two front tires. Yo' see they are bot' different patterns. The right is a Mohawk, Nine-dash-Nine pattern. The left is a Fisk, pattern A-Eight-dash-Eight, very much worn. Bot' rear tires are new Goodyears, pattern A-Eight-dash-Eight. All these pictures match the tires on the car driven by Mamzelle Berthe. Yes. And it is a black Fo'd coupe," he added triumphantly.

Fontenette studied the pictures for a minute or two and then passed them on to Henry, who merely glanced at them and handed them to the sheriff. Studying the woman, Henry caught a glint of apprehension in her hard, black eyes.

"Seems lak' yo' gotta lot of explaining to do, Mamzelle," he warned. "Better mak' things easy fo' yo'self by telling w'at yo' know."

"I—I didn't have anything to do with it," she burst out. "Someone locked him in my garage and left the car engine running."

"Hokay," Henry encouraged gently. "Mebbe yo' tell us how come the body was dump' in the bya, yes?"

"We—I was in the city all last week," she revealed. "I got back Saturday about midnight. My friend dropped me off about a block from my house. I was unlocking the front door when I heard my car running in the garage at the back of the lot. I got the key from where I always hide it whenever I go away on a visit, and opened up the garage. I turned on the light and then reached through the car window and switched off the ignition. That was when I first noticed him sitting behind the wheel.

"I don't remember what happened next, because I found myself lying on the ground outside the garage. After a while, I got up, went inside and took another look. I thought he was just sleeping, for his face didn't have that whitish look most dead people have. But he was dead, all right."

She paused, apparently reluctant to continue.

"Go on, go on," the D. A. prompted impatiently. "What did you do next?"

"I was scared stiff, having a dead man on my hands. I couldn't figure how Dominique could have gotten into my garage, because the door was padlocked on the outside, and the key of the padlock was where I usually hide it whenever I go on a visit and leave my car at home. Well, I called Morrie—my friend I'd been visiting in New Orleans with. I asked him to come out right away. When he arrived, I took him into the garage and showed him what was in the front seat of my car, and asked him to call the police. But he was scared his big, fat wife would find out he'd taken me to the state hardware dealers' convention in the city, instead of her. It was him who thought of driving my car out of town and dropping Dominique in the bayou."

"Who is this man?" Fontenette demanded sternly.

"Wild horses won't drag his name from my lips," she stated with dramatic fervor.

Old Hickory winked knowingly at Henry, then turned and loped from the room. The D. A. looked after him, then began pacing to and fro, with his hands clasped behind

his back. Five minutes passed, with Mamzelle Berthe fidgeting nervously in her chair, her frightened eyes following the dapper figure of Fontenette as he paced slowly to and fro.

Presently Henry broke the silence. He asked, "Yo' knew that Voisin, yes?"

She shrugged "Sure. He was a very old friend."

"Yo' knew Willie Campion? Well enough to let him use yo' car, yes?"

She pouted. "That freak! I wouldn't be found dead in his company."

"Yo' meet Dominique while yo' were in N'Awlyins?"

"Just once. We were having supper in the Vieux Carre, when he came in with two other fellas, all of them soused to the gills. One of them wore glasses and a mustache, like Willie Campion. But his clothes didn't bag on him like Willie's."

"Yo' figure that wan was somebody yo' knew, yes?"

Berthe Reynaud frowned in thought. "Now that you mention it, he did remind me of someone I'd seen around here. But the mustache and glasses threw me off."

Another five minutes passed, with the D. A. still pacing the floor. Then Old Hickory looked into the room and beckoned. Fontenette and Henry followed him to the D. A.'s office, where a man sat beside the desk. As they entered, he popped to his feet, glared belligerently at Fontenette and demanded in a surprisingly deep voice:

"What in hell's the idea of that stool pigeon of yours dragging me up here?"

"The idea, Mr. Desloins," the D. A. replied smoothly, "is to investigate your reason for helping Berthe Reynaud to dispose of the body of one Dominique Voisin."

Maurice Desloins bellowed, "That's a damned lie! You can't prove—"

"Mamzelle Berthe done tol' us all about it," Henry cut him off.

The little hardware dealer wilted into his chair like a wet sack.

"We didn't kill him," he denied weakly. Then he let the words come, like water rushing through a broken dam, corroborating in every detail the story told by Berthe Reynaud.

When the little man concluded his hysterical narrative, the D. A. turned to Old Hickory and ordered, "Take him over to the sheriff's office and keep him there for the present."

As they left, he walked around behind his desk and sat down. "And that is that," he murmured. He lifted his shoulders in a shrug and fluttered his hands angrily before his face. *"Ma foi!* A tempest in a teapot."

"So?" Henry drawled.

The D. A. picked up a pencil and drew meaningless circles on the blotter. Henry sat down in the chair just vacated by Desloins and watched him with cynical eyes, seeing in the aimless movements of the district attorney's pencil the turning of the wheels within wheels of small-town politics. Maurice Desloins was a power in the Young Liberals, the opposition political organization. By passing the charge to the files, Mr. Desloins could be persuaded to tone down his party's aggressiveness.

"You will not prosecute, no?" Henry queried.

FONTENETTE stopped doodling and sighed unhappily. "What will it get us, *mon cher Henri?"* he sighed. "If we put Desloins in jail, the Young Liberals will yell 'frame-up.' You know, people will believe what they wish to believe. Besides, prosecuting a pair of philanderers won't solve the murder of Dominique Voisin."

"A dead human body has certain rights," Henry pointed out. "It may not be disposed of as one would dispose of the carcass of a sick dog. Tossing dead bodies into the bayou could become a local custom."

"There's a clever scoundrel behind all this," Fontenette said. "Already, we have two murders, both obviously connected with the swindling of Mr. Denn. Apparently, the one who shot Waldrup followed Voisin here and murdered him by locking him in Mamzelle Berthe's garage. Probably the killer will never be apprehended, because neither we nor the New Orleans police know whom to look for. We can think of him only as one who impersonated Willie Campion. Once he discards that disguise, he vanishes into thin air."

"You're planning to let the fish die on the hook, yes?" Henry suggested, half angrily.

The D. A. shrugged. "What else can we do? Even if you arrested someone for the murder of Voisin, a competent defense lawyer could punch your case full of holes by

claiming that Voisin had met death by misadventure. The state would have to prove that the murder was premeditated. The defense could claim that the accused simply locked Voisin, who was known to be helpless drunk, in the garage merely to keep him out of harm's way, and that Voisin awoke, started the motor and then fell asleep again. You see, *mon ami?"*

"You suggest we forget the whole affair, yes?" Henry drawled.

"Main non," Fontenette assured him. "How often have I heard you say that a clever killer always traps himself by his own cleverness? Since there is no statute of limitations on homicide, we can afford to wait." He rose and came from behind the desk. "Well, I suppose I'd better tell those two love birds to go."

Henry chuckled. *"Ma foi!* If you have decided to do nothing until the murderer walks into your office and announces himself, I think I'll be better employed in policing my own ville. *Bo' jou'!"*

He descended to the street and was walking toward his car when he saw Denn, Larcade and Shippey sitting under the hotel awning. The oil man beckoned to Henry.

"I don't like bein' hornswoggled," Denn asserted, when Henry joined the trio. "No, sir-ee! I'll cheerfully give dollars where I won't stand for bein' gypped outa one thin dime. That's me."

"Yes?" Henry murmured politely.

"That's what I called you over here for," the oil man continued. "I just want to state, right here in the presence of two witnesses, that I'll pay a ten percent ree-ward for the recovery of that money I was hornswoggled outa. See?"

Henry nodded. "Thass mos' liberal. I'll see w'at I can do to earn that ree-ward. Yes."

He walked back across the street to his jalopy and climbed in behind the wheel. He was about to start the motor when he saw Old Hickory loping toward him across the courthouse lawn with an air of urgency that suggested a giraffe in flight.

The young deputy halted beside the car and leaned both arms on the edge of the open window, his sallow face contorted in an angry scowl.

"Old fool!" he spat.

Henry scowled angrily. "Meaning me, yes?" he snapped.

"Mais non." Old Hickory grinned apologetically. He continued in English, "I am talk about that Fontenette. Look, I am work ma haid off, an' w'at happen'? I bring in that Mamzelle Berthe and her boy frien'. Yes. Eh, man! They is admit throwing Voisin's body from the car. But the D. A., he says thass all right, only don't do it no mo'. Yo' see w'at I mean, yes?"

Henry smiled sympathetically; "he did know."

Fortier scowled. "Eh, man, yo' don't know nothing. *Non.* W'at yo' t'ink that dam' woman she's say to me, Andre Zhockson Fortier? She's say 'So long, Rabbit-puss!' Thass w'at she's say to me."

"So yo' tu'n in yo' star, yes?" Henry said.

"Mais non,' the deputy denied. "Coozan Al he's put me on that Denn, jus' to mak' sho' he's not leave' town. W'at yo' know about that wan, *hein?"*

"Very little, very little," Henry admitted. "Well, *mon petit,* keep bot' yo' eyes on him. *Bo' jou'!"*

He started the motor and backed the car, waving to Denn as the ancient vehicle clattered past the hotel. Recalling that he had just promised the oil man to see what he could do about earning the proffered reward, he wondered why convention sometimes required one to tell little white lies, or to make promises which seemed impossible of fulfillment, for he was satisfied that never again would Mr. Denn lay hands on his eighty thousand dollars.

ST. ODILE was drowsing in the afternoon heat as Henry's jalopy clattered across the drawbridge, shimmied up the tree-shaded main street and came to a clangorous stop in front of the town hall.

Jimmy Bourdelon, the junior member of St. Odile's two-man police force, was lounging on a wooden bench outside a green door marked "Police Headquarters," a position from which he could observe most of what went on in the tiny business district. He rose and gave Henry customary greeting.

Henry blew out his handlebar mustache in a contemptuous "Pouf!" as he alighted from the car and went inside. Jimmy followed, a look of eager curiosity on his lean face.

"I heard there were big doings in Sellierville last night," he prompted.

"Beeg?" Henry waved both hands in a

deprecatory shrug. "*Mais oui.* Beeg jus' lak' a balloon full up wit' gas. Somebody he sticks it wit' a pin and—pouf!"

He paused before a battered steel filing cabinet, opened a drawer and brought forth two chipped china cups. He said "But I don't have the trip fo' not'ing. I got me a knot on ma haid, and a blue place on ma right shoulder. Also, I learn me a new word: ho'nswoggle."

He lifted a tin coffee dripper from the small oil stove set upon a packing box against the inner wall of the little white-washed room, filled both cups with coffee thick and black and strong enough to float an anvil. He carried one of the cups behind his desk and sat down in his creaky swivel chair.

"Anyt'ing out of the ordinary happen since I lef'?" he inquired.

"Herb Mathieu stopped by early this morning and asked me to keep a lookout for a blue, '38 model Chevvie sedan, stolen from in front of the Trianon movie house in Sellierville last night," Jimmy told him. "When Herb came by on his afternoon patrol a while ago, he told me the car had been picked up on Canal Street, in N'Awlyins this forenoon."

Henry shrugged; apparently, the highway patrolman's life was dedicated to the recovery of missing cars which, usually, were found hidden in the brush lining the highway, with their gasoline tanks empty. Still, the fact that the latest missing car had been found as far away as New Orleans planted the germ of a thought in the back of his mind.

He rose and refilled his coffee cup. Returning to his chair, he lighted a stogie and told Jimmy of his adventures in the parish seat.

"Looks as if the killer, whoever he is, tried to frame both Willie Campion and Voisin," Jimmy remarked. "But I can't figured his reason for following Voisin to Sellierville and killing him, instead of leaving him for the N'Awlyins cops to gather in for the murder of that Waldrup character."

"Mos' likely, that wan, he was scare' Voisin would talk out loud to the city cops," Henry said. "Thass why he rubbed him out. He missed finding that check in Voisin's clothes, and tried to get it away from me."

"But why?" Jimmy argued. "Why take such a risk for a bum check?"

"Because his writing was on the back of it, above Voisin's signature," Henry explained. "He feared that handwriting might be identified as his. Mos' likely he's still hanging around Sellierville, watching fo' an opportunity to get his hands on them papers w'at Denn is carrying. If he could get them, as well as the check, he'd figure they would be not'ing left to connect him wit' them two murders. Yo' see?"

"He's nuts," the ex-marine grunted.

"Nuts—*mais oui,*" Henry agreed. "Mebbe he don't know it, but banks mos' generally keep a duplicate list of serial numbers on file. If he's smart as he seems to be, that won't cramp his style. They's plenty of places where a smart operator can dispose of hot cash. Yes."

Jimmy lit a cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. He said "The killer must have known Willie Campion, which suggests that he also knew his way around the parish. Most likely, he's someone we both know."

HENRY nodded. "Mos' any tall, skinny feller could put on a baggy suit, a ragged false mustache and a pair of shell-rimmed glasses and look like Willie at a distance." Grinning broadly, he added, "But he would have to be a contortionist, him, to imitate Willie's walk."

He glanced at his watch. "How 'bout yo' getting some sleep? Yo' ain't being paid fo' a fo'ty-eight-hour shift. Better go home ontil midnight."

"I could do with a spell of bunk fatigue, all right," Jimmy admitted. "If I don't show up by midnight, give me a ring." He put on his hat and left.

Henry put his feet on the desk, half reclined in his swivel chair and closed his eyes in an effort to visualize Charley Ferrier made up with a ragged mustache and shell-rim bifocals. It was, he realized, a far-fetched possibility. But, nevertheless, worth considering. Both Ferrier and Campion had the same type of face. Both were tall and slender. And the lawyer had been out of town for the past week, ostensibly in Baton Rouge. But then, the state capital was only about two hours' drive from New Orleans. A man could do business in Baton Rouge

during the day, thus establishing an alibi, and spend his evenings in New Orleans.

At five o'clock a newsboy delivered a New Orleans afternoon paper which Henry scanned eagerly for some reference to the Waldrup murder. There was no mention of the case. This suggested to him that the New Orleans police were playing it cagey.

Even before he finished reading the paper, Henry's mind was centering about the possibility of Denn's becoming the next victim. Assuming that the killer still wanted to gain possession of the incriminating documents the oil man was carrying on his person, it seemed very likely.

He thought about going home to supper, but because of the uneasy feeling that something was due to break soon, he was reluctant to go beyond hearing of the telephone. He pulled the switch controlling the street lights, then called Brossin's drug store and ordered sandwiches sent over. Having eaten, he lighted a stogie, went outside and sat on the bench, enjoying the sudden coolness of the evening as he watched the distant lightning flickers that heralded a storm moving inland from the Gulf.

THE next three hours passed in slow motion. The lightning flares were almost continuous now. A few raindrops spattered on the pavement. Rising, Henry went inside, seated himself in his swivel chair. He was lifting his feet on the desk when the jangle of the telephone filled the little room with sound.

Lifting, the receiver, he responded drowsily, "Po-lice, yes?"

"Henri?" He jerked wide awake; only one voice in the parish could cause that ear-tickling buzz in the telephone receiver. Moreover, the fact that Mr. Fontenette had given Henry's name a French flavor by putting the accent on the last syllable indicated that he was worried about something.

"Tres bien," Henry drawled.

"We need you over here, *mon cher Henri,"* the D. A. buzzed. "Can you come at once, and bring Bourdelon with his fingerprinting outfit?"

"Mais oui," Henry agreed eagerly. "What goes?"

"Hell has broken loose," Fontenette wailed. "Sam Larcade has been shot and killed in Mr. Denn's room. And Vince Cartier is holding Pinky McConnell for murder."

HENRY held the telephone in front of his face and glared at it as if he considered the instrument responsible for what he regarded as an absurd statement. Of all the people in the parish, Pinky McConnell had seemed the least likely suspect. Aware that the D. A. was still talking, Henry put the receiver against his ear.

"—is no more guilty than I am," Fontenette was saying. "But just now appearances are decidedly against him. I'd like you to come over and straighten Cartier out, before he runs the parish headlong into a damage suit."

"Just what happened?" Henry inquired impatiently.

"Vicou put Fortier on Denn this afternoon, to make sure that he wouldn't slip out of town," the D. A. explained. "Fortier, it seems, was sitting on a bench opposite the hotel, when he heard two pistol shots coming from Denn's room, the windows of which look out on the square. He rushed across the street and up the stairs to Denn's room, where he found McConnell standing over the body of Larcade, with a small automatic pistol in his hand. Fortier disarmed him and then called Cartier, who placed McConnell under arrest."

"I'll come," Henry agreed. "But you'll have to ask Vicou to send over a couple of deputies to police the town until Jimmy and I return. And don't let anyone disturb that room."

"I'll see to that," the D. A. promised. *"Au 'voir!"*

Henry called Jimmy's home and ordered him to report at once. When the ex-marine arrived, Henry repeated the D. A.'s story.

"Pinky McConnell, of all people!" Jimmy exclaimed. "I always figured him for a good Joe."

Henry shrugged. "Jus' goes to show yo' never can tell about a pusson," he declared. "That Larcade, he may have given Pinky plenty motive fo' a killing. Yes."

Jimmy paused in the act of packing the various items of his outfit in a small leather case. "How come?"

"Fontenette figure' that Larcade might induce Denn to bring suit against the estate, in the belief that Mamzelle Voisin would

mak' good Denn's loss, rather than have Dominique branded as a swindler."

"But that would be blackmail," Jimmy pointed out.

"Sure. Peenkee, he fin' out about that and goes on the warpath. Red-haids, they got savage tempers."

"I still don't believe he'd shoot Larcade," Jimmy argued. "If he went on a rampage against that little shyster, he'd more likely use his fists."

The distant wail of a siren pierced the night like the lament of a banshee. Looking toward the bridge, Henry saw the headlights of a speeding car bobbing along the highway. A minute later the sheriff's big black car roared into town and stopped before the town hall with a shriek of tortured rubber.

The two deputies sent to police the town scrambled out. Henry and Jimmie took their places. The driver whirled the car around, aimed it at the bridge and raced up the highway, with the siren going full blast.

Twenty minutes later the driver eased the car in front of the Hotel Joffrion, where a couple of city policemen were making a half-hearted effort to break up the crowd collected before the entrance. Followed by Jimmy, Henry plowed a path through the crowded lobby and climbed the stairs to the second floor, where another city cop was standing guard. Recognizing Henry, the man looked through an open doorway and announced:

"He's here."

Albert Fontenette stepped into the corridor and advanced toward Henry. "Before you go in there," he said "I want you to know that someone broke into the courthouse some time this evening and rifled both mine and the sheriff's desks. Evidently, the burglar was looking for that check. You still have it, I hope?"

Henry touched his shirt pocket and nodded. "What time was the entrance made?" he asked.

"Some time between six-thirty and eight o'clock."

Henry stroked his mustache, aware that breaking into the courthouse wasn't difficult, since the building would be practically deserted after six o'clock in the evening. Moreover, the entrance doors were never locked.

"Hokay," Henry said in English, "W'at yo' figure all this adds up to?"

The D. A. made a fluttering motion with his hands. "Larcade was carrying Mr. Denn's papers. The two transfers were found in his coat pocket. But the photostatic copy of the power-of-attorney is gone. Obviously, he was murdered for it."

"Where does that leave Denn?"

Fontenette shrugged. "Just about where he was before," he revealed. "Let us go inside. Everything is just as Cartier found it. Dr. Lavelle left about half an hour ago. He said both bullets had lodged in Larcade's heart. He promised to have them for us tomorrow."

HENRY paused just inside the door and looked over the room. The body of Sam Larcade lay on its back on the floor between the two front windows. From the body, Henry's gaze swung slowly toward the small automatic pistol lying on the dresser, then moved on to rest for an instant on Pinky McConnell, who sat stiffly in the room's only chair, his pink face glistening with perspiration. Vicou and Fortier sat side by side on the sill of the single side window, while Denn, Shippey and Vince Cartier were perched on the edge of the bed, like crows on a rail fence.

Henry stepped over to Pinky and asked gently. "W'y yo' kill that wan?"

"I didn't," the red-haired geologist snapped. "I had no reason to kill him."

"I foun' him standin' over Larcade," Andrew Jackson Fortier accused shrilly. "He had him that gon in his han', him."

"The hell of it," McConnell declared with a whimsical smile, "is that he's dead right. I was standing there. And I had that little gun in my hand. But I didn't shoot Larcade."

Henry sat down on the bed beside Cartier, the town chief of police.

"Hokay," he encouraged Pinky. "Suppose yo' tell us w'at happen'?"

"Charley Ferrier came to me this afternoon, just before he started for Three Oaks, to arrange for the burial of Dominique's body," Pinky began. "He said Larcade had come to his office a short while before with an outrageous proposal that the estate make good Mr. Denn's loss in order to keep Dominique from being branded as a crook.

"Charley couldn't stop to argue the matter with Larcade at that time, so he suggested

that he see me. Larcade didn't find me until about eight-thirty. He suggested then that I meet him in Mr. Denn's room in about half an hour. I realized that he was trying to work a little polite blackmail, probably knowing how touchy the Voisin girls are about the family name.

"I tried to give Larcade the brush-off, knowing damned well that he was bluffing. Moreover, I threatened to take him apart and put him together again the wrong way if he bothered Miss Voisin with his silly threats. But he wouldn't back down, and pleaded with me to come to Mr. Denn's room, where he would show me a photostat copy of a power-of-attorney which he claimed had been forged by Dominique. So I agreed.

"Shortly after nine o'clock I left my room, which is about halfway along the hall toward the back of the building. I was about thirty feet from the door of this room when I heard two sharp sounds in quick succession, like a stick being snapped twice. Then I saw the transom go dark as the light was switched off.

"I knocked on the door. Someone invited me in. So I turned the knob and entered. Next thing I knew, someone was sticking a gun in my ribs and ordering me to walk over to the bed. I was so startled that I whirled about and grabbed for the gun. If I'd stopped to think about the risk, I don't believe I'd have attempted anything like that. But it happened that I got the gun first grab and twisted it out of the man's hand. Then he swung a haymaker that almost tore my head off. He was trying to get the gun away from me, when steps sounded in the hall outside. Then Fortier burst in, floundered around for several minutes until he found the wall switch. By then, our friend had vanished, and I was standing there like a dope, holding my jaw in my left hand and the gun in my right. That's about all, I guess."

"Where did that feller go?" Henry asked.

McConnell shook his head. "Damned if I know. He just disappeared."

"They wasn't anybody in the room but him," Fortier stated emphatically. "Nobody coulda gone outa the side window, onto the roof of the movie house, because the screen, she was hook'. Yes."

Vince Cartier offered, "I went over the windowsill with my flashlight. Nobody escaped that way."

HENRY looked pointedly at an inner door connecting the adjoining room with Denn's. It would, he thought, be just like the town police chief to overlook the obvious. An ex-serviceman, Cartier had been elected on his war record. So far, he had proved to be thoroughly honest and conscientious, but his actual knowledge of police technique could have been engraved on a dime.

"Yo' investigate' that do', yes?" Henry queried.

Cartier flushed. "Sure. But it was fastened on the other side."

"The wan w'at murder' Larcade could have slipped outa the room through that do'," Henry declared. "W'ile Ol' Hickoree was floundering around this room, looking fo' the light switch, the other feller coulda sneaked along the hall and gone down the back stairs to the alley."

Henry walked around to the adjoining room and discovered that the connecting door was held shut by a common screen hook. He surmised now that the killer had entered Denn's room through the inner door, and had used it as a means of exit when frightened away by the unexpected arrival of Fortier.

To test his theory further, Henry walked along the corridor to the door opening onto the back stairway. Descending to the alley, he crossed to an automobile wash rack, where a short Negro in hip boots and rubber apron was hosing down a car.

"Evenin', Cap'n Henry, suh!" the man greeted.

"Evening, Jesse!" Henry responded, adding, "I'm trying to fin' out if anybody come down that back stairs between nine and nine-thirty."

"U—m?" The Negro seemed trying hard to remember. "Yassuh, I recomember seein' a man comin' down them steps 'bout that time. A white man. He ran down the alley an' tu'ned the co'ner into Fou'th Street."

"Do yo' remember w'at he look' lak'?"

"Nawsuh! An' I means nawsuh," the Negro declared emphatically. "I hain't stud'in' no white mens when they're runnin' down an alley in the da'k. Not me, Cap'n Henry, suh."

Henry thanked him and climbed the stairs again. When he entered Denn's room, he found that Jimmy had taken the remaining cartridges from the murder gun and dusted them for fingerprints. Now he was studying them through a jeweler's loop.

"Yo' get anyt'ing on them cartridges?" Henry inquired.

"And how!" Jimmy chuckled. "There's a clear imprint of the tip of a forefinger and thumb on each one." He straightened up and removed the eye-piece. "Funny how most guys will wipe a gun clean and never give a thought to their prints on the cartridges."

"I want you to take my fingerprints and compare them with those on the cartridges," Pinky insisted.

JIMMY used a small rubber roller to ink McConnell's right forefinger and thumb, after which he made an impression on a strip of celluloid. He walked over to the dresser, put the magnifying glass to his right eye and compared Pinky's prints with the faint smears on the cartridges.

"No similarity," he announced after a minute or two. "The prints on the cartridges are of the type known as the Tented Arch pattern. Pinky's are Twin Loops. He might have fired the gun. But someone else loaded it."

Turning to Fontenette, Henry announced, "The Nigra w'at runs the wash rack behin' the hotel saw a man come down the back stairs between nine and nine-thirty, an' run down the alley to Fou'th Street." He looked accusingly at Fortier and the police chief, "Looks lak' y'all ove'look somet'ing. Yes."

"What the hell was I to do?" Cartier demanded angrily. "Ol' Hickory caught Mr. McConnell in here, with the gun in his hand. What else could I think but that he'd done it?"

"Well, I reckon, me," Henry said, "Peenkee is in the clear." He looked at the D. A. "W'at you say, Albair?"

Fontenette smiled his relief. "I didn't believe he was guilty. That's why I called you over."

"Thanks, Henry!" Pinky exclaimed gratefully. "You're a real pal. You, too, Mr. D. A."

Denn rose stiffly from his seat on the side of the bed. "I didn't think Mr. McConnell done it," he declared. "He's a square shooter. The killer's a rat—but smart."

"No killer is smot," Henry argued. "If he was smot, he wouldn't kill. Besides, this wan, he's done leave his signature." He pointed toward the row of little cartridges on the dresser.

The oil man pouted. "What the hell good is fingerprints if you don't know who made 'em?" he wanted to know. "All that feller has to do is keep outa your way." He looked questioningly at Fontenette. "Okay for me to leave now? I want the hotel people to move me to another room. I couldn't sleep a wink in here, after what's happened."

"It's quite all right for you to go to another room, sir," the D. A. agreed.

"Befo' yo' go," Henry stopped him, "I want yo' to tell me exactly where yo' were at the tam' of the killing."

"I was settin' downstairs under the marquee," the oil man declared. "I didn't know there was anything wrong until I saw the cops come a-runnin'."

"Hokay." Henry dismissed him. He turned to Shippey. "How 'bout yo'?"

"H-m?" The oil scout rubbed his prominent chin and closed his eyes in an effort to concentrate. "I think I was in my office at the time. I've got a little cubbyhole of a place in the Lejeune Block, and went up there after supper to type some letters. I got through about nine, and came down on the street. I saw people running toward the hotel. So I walked up the block and saw Mr. Denn, and asked him what was going on. Somebody—one of the bellhops, I think—said Larcade had been shot in Mr. Denn's room. So we came on up."

"That's about right," Denn corroborated. He started toward the door, then paused and looked back at Henry. "In case you're lucky," he said, "that offer of a ten-percent ree-ward still stands."

Vince Cartier called in the undertaker's men with their long basket. As the body was borne from the room, the police chief followed.

Jimmy picked up the cartridges with a pair of tweezers and placed them carefully in a small matchbox, which he packed in his leather case. Handing the gun to Vicou, he suggested:

"You might look up the registration on this, Sheriff."

"I'll see about it firs' thing tomorrow," Vicou promised. He pocketed the weapon and followed Old Hickory from the room.

Pinky McConnell was about to leave when Henry stopped him. "I'd lak' yo' to tell me everyt'ing w'at yo' know about that Charlee Ferrier," Henry said.

The D. A. threw up his hands in pious horror. "Good heavens, Henry! You're not intimating—?"

"I don' know w'at that word mean', me," Henry cut him off. "All I know fo' shore is that somebody in this set-up has got him a haid full of homicide. And I aim to fin' out who that wan is. Hokay, Peenkee."

"I really can't tell you any more than is common knowledge hereabouts," the red-haired geologist said. "Claude Voisin, Estelle's father, died when she was only fifteen. He appointed Charley Ferrier as administrator—"

"We know all that, Peenkee," Henry interrupted. "W'at I want to know is, does Charlee Ferrier gamble, or play the ponies? Things lak' that."

"I wouldn't know, Henry," Pinky declared apologetically.

"Just what are you thinking, Henry?" Fontenette asked uneasily. "Better be sure of what you're doing, and not go off half-cock' and land the parish in a suit for false arrest."

Henry shrugged. "I ain't sho' about anything yet," he confessed. "Right now, ma haid's full of theories. But they ain't no needcessity fo' yo' to worry about damage suits. I won't mak' any move, me, until I know I am right."

What are you planning to do now?" the D. A. inquired.

Henry grinned. "Mebbe it's better yo' don't know. Come along, Jimmy."

THEY left the hotel and hurried along the south side of the square toward the Lejeune Block, a two-story brick building, the lower half occupied by stores, the upper floor divided into offices which were tenanted by lawyers, or by people connected with the oil business.

Climbing the stairs, they walked along the corridor, reading the names lettered in black upon the glass door panels, and finally halted before a closed door which bore the announcement:

CHARLES B. FERRIER
Attorney-at-Law

Henry tried the door and found to his surprise that it was unlocked. Pushing the panel inward, he reached around the door frame and punched the switch button, flooding the twelve-by-twelve room with light. He looked over the office, his glance taking in the desk set at right angles to the window, the shelves of calf-bound legal volumes covering an entire wall, the safe, the steel filing cabinets, the typewriter on its metal stand, the two hard oak visitors' chairs. He looked ceilingward, noticed the thin haze of smoke swirling about the light fixture, and sniffed the reek of burned paper that filled the air.

"Smells lak' somebody was burning up papers," Henry remarked, stepping across the threshold.

Jimmy brushed past him, reached under the desk and pulled out a wire wastebasket half-filled with blackened paper ash.

"Here we are," he said.

"Hokay." Henry took the basket and sat down in the swivel chair. He nodded toward the safe. "See if yo' can fin' anything aroun' the edge of the do'."

While Jimmy dusted the front of the safe with a flat camel hair brush loaded with powder, Henry pawed over the ash in the basket. He found what looked like a fragment of black paper covered with white writing.

It was charred around the edges, so scorched that it was almost too brittle to handle, but still recognizable as the lower third of the photostatic copy of the forged power-of-attorney which he last had seen in Denn's possession.

The facsimile of the notary's seal was still legible, as was Larcade's forged signature and the words written beneath it, which read:

> My commission expires January 7, 1948.

Taking the check from his shirt pocket, Henry compared the writing above Voisin's signature with the wording across the bottom of the burned photostat, and perceived that both writings had been made by the same hand.

"Look at this, Jimmy," he invited.

The ex-marine paused in his scrutiny of the safe door. Removing the magnifying glass from his right eye, he stepped over to the desk. When Henry placed the fragment of photostat side by side with the check, Jimmy examined them, first with naked eyes, and then with the aid of his magnifying glass.

"I'd say they were written by the same guy," he declared finally. "The *r's* and the *s's* are alike on both."

"Reckon we'll be playing it safe in holding this as evidence," Henry agreed. He placed the scorched fragment in one of Ferrier's business envelopes, on the face of which he wrote:

> Found among ash of burned papers in wastebasket in office of Charles B. Ferrier, eleven-fifteen o'clock, p.m., July 28, 1947.
> H. Pou

"Yo' fin' anyt'ing on that safe?" he asked Jimmy.

"Dozens of overlays, all made by the same guy," the ex-marine informed him. "But I've got a few clear ones along the edge of the door. I'll have 'em off in a jiffy."

He used several paper-thin celluloid foils in lifting a number of fingerprints from the door of the safe. Carrying these to the desk, he compared them with the prints on the cartridges.

"They match, all right," he declared finally. "Looks like Ferrier's our man. At least, he loaded the gun."

"I still ain't satisfied, me," Henry murmured. "So far, I ain't seen a sample of handwriting w'at I know definitely to be his. Le's see."

He opened the desk drawers one after another and examined their contents, fully aware that he was being highly irregular, but knowing very well that Fontenette would have interposed all manner of objections to his request for a search warrant. He found only letters, all from clients. Baffled, he rose and tried the filing cabinets. Here, everything was neatly contained in folders. But every page was typewritten.

Returning to the desk, Henry sat down in the swivel chair and lifted the telephone. "Henry Pou, speaking fo' the district attorney's office," he told the operator. "I want yo' to connect me wit' Three Oaks."

A minute later a pert feminine voice answered: "Yes? What is it?"

Henry said, "I am trying to reach Meestaire Charlee Ferrier. He is there, yes?"

"I am sorry. Mr. Ferrier was to arrive this afternoon, to arrange for the burial of the late Mr. Dominique Voisin. He was to come by the water route through Bis Lake and Six-mile Swamp. The undertaker is here with the body. But Mr. Ferrier hasn't yet arrived. We're beginning to fear he's become lost in the swamp."

"We'll send out a search party," Henry promised. *"Au 'voir!"*

He replaced the telephone, lifted it again and called the hotel garage. He said, "Meestaire Charlee, he keeps his car wit' y'all, yes?"

"That's right," the garage attendant admitted.

"Has he taken it out?"

"Just a minute, I'll see." After a short interval, the garageman declared, "His car's still here in the garage."

"Hokay; thanks!" Henry cradled the telephone and leaned back in the chair. By now, the pattern was crystal clear—weeks, perhaps months, of careful planning, a single mistake resulting in blind panic, and headlong flight to avoid arrest.

Obviously, Ferrier had planned well—so well that he might have avoided suspicion had he not made the mistake of leaving the murder gun in the hand of Pinky McConnell. Sober reflection must have warned him that the weapon could be traced. As a lawyer, he knew that this would lead to questions which he couldn't safely answer. So, faced with this possibility, he had sought safety in flight.

Henry sighed heavily and rose. Handing to Jimmy the check and the envelope containing the charred fragment of photostat, he said:

"Tak' good care of these. They're valuable evidence. Me, I go to bring back wan of the D. A.'s sacred cows. Yes."

MIDNIGHT saw Henry puttering down Bayou Papillon in a flat-bottomed skiff propelled by an outboard motor. Overhead, a bank of black clouds, its forefront riven by vivid lightning flares, was sweeping inland in advance of a tropical storm.

Henry looked morosely at the lightning-

riven sky. The storm, he told himself, would have to come at a time like this. That it would be accompanied by tearing wind and a roaring downpour he knew from past experience. Probably, too, it would catch him far from any shelter. But there was nothing he could do about it. He must go on, if only to cut down Ferrier's lead.

Putting himself in Ferrier's place, Henry surmized that the other would head straight for Three Oaks Landing by way of the cut-off leading from Bayou Papillon to the mile-wide, circular lake called La Soucoupe, because of its resemblance to a saucer. Leaving the little lake, he would head northwestward through Bayou Bis—Brown Bayou—which cut through the narrowest part of Six-mile Swamp to the canal forming the eastern boundary of the plantation. Reaching Three Oaks, he could replenish his supply of gasoline, collect provisions and camping gear and head south through the canal into the great marsh that covers most of lower Louisiana. Once in the *Terre Tremblant*, the great shaking prairie, with its network of canals, he could avoid arrest indefinitely.

Four miles south of Sellierville, Henry throttled the "gazzoleen" to a mere crawl and headed the skiff through the crevasse known as the cut-off, once a break in the levee, but now a convenient short cut for moss gatherers and for people from the plantation traveling the water route in preference to the longer journey by road.

The sky was now one continuous flare, and the thunder sounded like the rumble of distant artillery as Henry opened up the motor and raced the skiff across La Soucoupe to the mouth of Bayou Bis. He was perspiring freely as he held the skiff to the center of the narrow bayou. As yet, there was no wind, and the heat was settling like a muggy blanket over the earth.

Twenty minutes later, he throttled down the motor again and went ahead at a bare two-knot speed as the boyou entered the swamp. He knew that the water among the trees was just deep enough to conceal snags that could rip the bottom out of the little craft. Taking a big flashlight from under the stern thwart, he sent a beam ahead of the boat, to make certain that he was following the channel marked by the parish surveyors. All about him huge, moss-draped cypresses reared up on their grotesque "knees" from the still, brown water, with an occasional lightning-blasted trunk looming in the darkness like a bleached skeleton draped in the tattered remnants of a burial shroud. It was an eerie enough place by daylight; in the dark it was terrifying. Not even the moss gatherers dared to venture into it after nightfall, for local tradition peopled the swamp with revenants, loups garous, feu-follets and other inhabitants of the spirit world.

Suddenly the darkness was ripped apart by a blinding flash. Henry heard the hissing crackle of a tree being struck, followed by a deafening peal of thunder. Flare after flare illuminated the surroundings with the swift intensity of a photographer's flash bulb, throwing into sharp relief the bulbous trunks of the trees that stretched moss-festooned limbs out over the water. A tearing wind set the tree-tops to swaying with a threshing of branches that almost rivaled the roar of the thunder. Then the skies opened and loosed a roaring downpour upon the earth.

Fearful that the wind would force the boat out of the channel, Henry flashed the light ahead, while he held the skiff to the center of the marked stretch of water. He was unable to see for more than a few yards in any direction, for the opaque curtain of falling rain diffused the light as if it were directed against a sheet of ground glass.

The rain was cold; every drop felt like ice. Soaked to the skin, Henry switched off the flashlight and crouched on the stern thwart, peering ahead through the frequent lightning flares, seeing only grotesque trunks rising out of rain-pocked water. Suddenly a flash revealed something white at the side of the channel a hundred yards ahead. A succeeding flash revealed it to be a big white motorboat. Blending with the following peal of thunder came a faint "Hallo!"

"Ma foi!" Henry exclaimed wonderingly. "What goes?"

HE PEERED ahead, waiting for another flash. When it came, he perceived that the motorboat's bow was higher than her stern, and that a man was standing erect in the cockpit, waving with his right hand, while with his left he held his hat before his face in a vain attempt to shield his eyes from

the pelting rain. In that swift interval, Henry recognized the tall, slender figure and long, narrow face of Charley Ferrier.

Unmindful now of possible snags, Henry opened the throttle and sent the skiff rushing toward the motorboat. As he came alongside, he shut off the motor, grasped the gunwale of the larger craft and brought his little boat to a stop.

"Am I glad you're here!" Ferrier shouted above the tumult of the storm. "I couldn't have stood this much longer. I always have a chill whenever I get wet."

Taking his flashlight, Henry clambered over the gunwale of the motorboat. Flashing the light over the cockpit, he saw a large alligator hide suitcase. Opening it, he found inside a suit of dark clothes, a black hat, a white shirt and a black necktie.

"I was planning to wear those at Dominique's funeral," Ferrier explained. He added plaintively, "For God's sake, get me back to town before I shake to pieces."

"Hokay," Henry assented, as Ferrier stepped into the skiff. "But firs'—" He patted the other's sodden clothing in search of a weapon.

Ferrier sat down on the midship thwart, shivering like a dog in a wet sack and looked curiously up at Henry. "What was the idea of that?" he chattered.

Henry started the motor, swung the skiff around and headed back toward Bayou Bis. "The idea," he declared gravely, "is that yo're onder arres'—fo' murder. Yes."

The lawyer shivered. "That's a bum joke, my friend," he chided.

Henry frowned. "Wan doesn't joke about murder," he declared soberly.

Ferrier peered up at him. "I still don't know what you're talking about."

"Yo kill' Sam Larcade tonight," Henry accused, "sometam' between nine and nine-thirty."

"Sam Larcade? But that's ridiculous. At nine o'clock I was waiting patiently for someone to come and rescue me."

"So?" Henry drawled skeptically.

"Of course! I left the boat landing in Sellierville about four o'clock, after seeing Stacy's hearse start by road to Three Oaks, with Dominique's remains. I took the water route because I wanted to reach Three Oaks ahead of the body and get the family mausoleum ready for its reception. But I ran the boat on a snag and punched a hole in her bottom. That was about five. I've been there ever since, fighting the damned mosquitoes. They almost drove me insane."

"You could have lef' Sellierville at fo' o'clock, jus' lak' yo' say," Henry pointed out. "But yo' could have wait' in the cut-off ontil well after dark, then ran back to town, kill' Larcade, retu'n to yo' boat and then start out fo' Three Oaks in earnest. But yo' mighta got to worrying about the time element. So yo' run the boat on a snag, hoping somebody will believe yo' story about bin stuck there since five o'clock."

"Why should I kill Larcade?" Ferrier queried angrily.

"Yo' cooked up a plan wit' that Waldrup to bunco ol' man Denn outa eighty thousan' dollars," Henry accused. "Yo' and Waldrup used Dominique Voisin as yo' patsy. Waldrup wrote a bum check fo' fifty thousand and gave it to Dominique. He tried to cash it, and made a fuss in the bank w'en he foun' out it was no good.

"After Waldrup sol' that option to Denn fo' eighty thousand, yo' figure Voisin would be right out in front as the chief suspect, if yo' kill' Waldrup. So yo' killed him and took his share of the rake-off. Then yo' took Dominique back to Sellierville, so the N'Awlyins cops would figure he'd run out, after shooting Waldrup. But you didn't want them to catch up wit' Dominique, knowing he'd bus' yo' leetle act wide open. So yo' took him in Berthe Reynaud's car out to her place and locked him up in her garage, wit' the car engine running.

"That made things look hokay to yo'. But yo' didn't figure on Denn blowing into town. Yo' knew he had a photostat copy of that power-of-attorney you'd fo'ged. And yo' were scared somebody would recognize yo' handwriting. So tonight yo' shot Larcade, took the photostat, left the hotel by the back stairs and ran down the alley to the Lejeune Block. In yo' office, yo' burned the papers in yo' wastebasket. But we recovered enough of it to sit yo' right smack in the 'lectric chair."

"In my office?" Ferrier quizzed. "How did you get in?"

"We jus' turn the do' knob and walk' right in," Henry told him.

Ferrier shook his head. "Something fishy there. I always lock up my office

whenever I leave, if only for a few minutes." He clasped his hands on his bony knees and stared thoughtfully at them for several minutes, as if he were trying hard to organize his thoughts. Presently he asked:

"What brought you to my office in the first place?"

"We foun' fingerprints on the ca'tridges in the murder gun—a twenty-five-caliber automatic," Henry revealed. "Acting on a hunch, I took Jimmy—ma assistant—to yo' office. He foun' yo' fingerprints on the front of the safe. They match those on the cartridges."

"That looks bad, I admit," Farrier said. "Obviously, the gun is the one stolen from the glove compartment of my car about ten days ago." He shivered violently and asked, "Has it occurred to you that someone may be trying to frame me?"

Henry shrugged, "Angola is full up wit' fellers w'at claim they bin frame'. Yes."

"You said you found some incriminating evidence in my office, aside from the fingerprints," Ferrier queried. "Just what is the nature of that evidence?"

"Part of that power-of-attorney w'at yo' tried to destroy," Henry told him. "Yo' writing on it matches the writing on the check."

"You still have it and the check, I hope?"

"*Mais oui.*"

Ferrier laughed through stiff lips, while his lanky frame shook with a chill. "Splendid! You have perhaps the one thing that'll clear me of this absurd charge."

Henry clenched his jaws to keep his own teeth from chattering as the cold wind cut through his sodden clothing and chilled him to the marrow. He asked:

"Jus' w'at yo' mean by that?"

"I mean that a handwriting analysis will prove I didn't have anything to do with this series of murders," Ferrier declared confidently.

Henry looked ahead through a lightning flash and saw that they had reached the junction of Bayou Bis and La Soucoupe. He gunned the motor and sent the skiff racing across the mile-wide lake toward the cut-off. When he throttled down the motor again and headed the boat through the crevasse, Ferrier said:

"I've been checking on various alibis. At first, I was scared stiff by the weight of evidence. It was all circumstantial, of course. But, as a lawyer, I realize how convincing it would sound to a jury. However, I can set you right in regard to my movements over the past week."

"Yo' got it all figure' out, yes?" Henry drawled.

"I spent last Saturday night, from eight o'clock on, at the home of some friends in Baton Rouge," the lawyer continued. "Moreover, I can account for almost every hour of the five preceding days. Not only that, but I can bring positive proof. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Disappoint? *Mais non*" Henry snapped. "Eh, man, if yo' think I pass maself a good tam' sending folks to the 'lectric chair, yo're plumb crazee. Yes. If yo' can alibi yo'self fo' las' week, I shall be mos' happy, me."

"I'm glad you feel that way about it," Ferrier said. "If you give me half a chance, I can square everything." He paused and peered reflectively at the water sloshing about in the bottom of the skiff, then added, "That is, everything except the gun. I'm worried about that. You see, I have no proof to support my claim that it was stolen from my car."

"We'll tak' that up in its proper order," Henry promised.

He eased the skiff out of the cut-off into Bayou Papillon and headed north toward the lights of Sellierville which showed dimly through the almost opaque curtain of falling rain. As his thoughts flashed back to his meeting with Ferrier in the swamp, he recalled a twinge of doubt evoked by the lawyer's unexpected behavior. Certainly, he hadn't acted as a man with three murders on his conscience would be expected to act when faced with arrest. And his reaction to the charge hadn't been the angry denunciation foreseen by Henry, but instead, hurt surprise. All of this made Henry wonder if he hadn't allowed the feeling of dislike which he had experienced upon the occasion of their first meeting to color his judgment. He gunned the motor and sent the skiff speeding toward the town, his doubt fast crystalizing.

He glanced skyward, noticed that the storm was sweeping northward. The rain, too, had fallen to a steady drizzle, which didn't make any difference now, since both of them were soaked to the skin.

Henry asked, "How 'bout that Denn trying to get his money back from the estate?"

Ferrier laughed through blue lips. "Fat chance! He's trying to run a bluff. What he really wants is to force Miss Voisin to assign the oil rights to him when she comes into full possession. If he could get that, he could well afford to lose his eighty thousand dollars."

"Yo' t'ink Mamzelle Voisin, she will let him have them oil rights?"

"I haven't had an opportunity to warn her yet," Ferrier admitted. "But I told Larcade I'd advise her against it."

"W'at yo' know 'bout that wan—Denn?"

"Not a thing. If he really fell for that confidence game cooked up by Dominique Voisin and that crowd in New Orleans, he must have let his greed blind his better judgment. No one but an utter fool would have paid out eighty thousand dollars without first making a painstaking investigation of the property."

"Yo' figure Dominique, he was mix' up with crooks, yes?"

"There doesn't seem to be any doubt about that," Ferrier agreed. "Probably they got him drunk, and kept him drunk, so that he wasn't aware of what was going on. However, they seem to have been unaware that Dominique had no power to sign checks."

"That," Henry drawled skeptically, "I don' onderstan', me."

"As you know," Ferrier went on to explain, "Dominique received an annual income from the estate. Apparently, that wasn't enough for his needs, because he wrote checks regardless of whether or not he had any money in his account. Every bank in New Orleans had been victimized at one time or another by him. Of course, I had to make all those rubber checks good, to keep him out of jail. Finally it became so embarrassing that I haled him into court and had him declared incompetent, which he certainly was, for he had not the faintest conception of the value of money. I was appointed his guardian. And what a headache that turned out to be!"

"I still don't onderstan' w'at that has to do wit' the con game them fellers work' on Denn."

"Just this: as an incompetent, Dominique had no right to sign checks. Every bank in the city had been notified of this, and as a consequence, wouldn't honor any check presented by him, unless it were countersigned by me, as his guardian. When he presented Waldrup's check at the Ivernia, they probably turned him down on that count alone, and not because the check was no good. Being drunk, he created a disturbance and was ejected from the bank."

"Why, then," Henry asked, "should them fellers try to get that check back?"

Ferrier shrugged. "I think you said yourself that someone feared the writing on it might be recognized. Obviously, Dominique was murdered in an attempt to recover it."

"I have a hunch, me," Henry said, "that ain't the right answer. W'at yo' think about that Shippee?"

"Shippey? I'd rather not say. I might be prejudiced," the lawyer replied tartly.

"Hokay. Yo don't lak' that wan, no," Henry conceded. He glanced to his right at the line of shantyboats moored alongside the levee, and beyond them to the rain-swept, empty streets of the town. He cut down the speed and headed the skiff toward the municipal wharf. "Yo' figure he might be mix' up in this beezness, yes?"

"I don't figure anything of the sort," Ferreir denied sharply. "All I care to say is that I wouldn't want him as a business partner."

"Yo' know him, yes?"

"I've seen him around town for the last few months. He has an office in the Lejeune Block, you know. That's all I care to know about him. Anything else I might tell you would be hearsay."

"Hokay," Henry said cheerfully. He shut off the motor, took a turn of the painter about a pile and made fast. "End of the line. All out."

HE PICKED up Ferrier's suitcase and stepped out on the wharf. The lawyer followed and suggested hopefully:

"Before you tuck me away behind bars, I wish you'd take me to the hotel and let me take a hot bath and get a change of clothes."

"Yo' can have yo' hot bath," Henry consented. "But yo' ain't going to no jail. Come on—le's walk fas', so we can work the chill outa our bones." He handed Ferrier the suitcase.

"That's pretty decent of you," Ferrier declared, falling into step with Henry. "All

along I figured you were bent on giving me the bum's rush to the hot seat. What caused you to change your mind?"

"I ain't right sho' I got me a min' jus' now," Henry evaded.

They walked another block in silence. Then the lawyer asked:

"Am I under arrest?"

Henry grinned. "Not yet. But yo' better not try to run away."

As they came out on the courthouse square, he looked toward the building and saw that the light was on in the sheriff's office, evidence that Jimmy Bourdelon was awaiting his return.

"Hokay, ma frien'." He slapped Ferrier reassuringly on the shoulder. "I reckon yo' can jus' run along and have yo' hot bath. Me, I got enough onfinish' beezness to keep ma blood circulating hokay fo' a while longer.. *Au 'voir!*" He turned and slanted across the street toward the courthouse, bowing his head against the pelting rain.

When Henry opened the door of the sheriff's office, he found Jimmy fast asleep on the settee, with his hat over his eyes.

"Wake up!" Henry boomed from the doorway. "Yo' t'ink this is a flophouse, yes?"

Jimmy knocked his hat aside with a sweep of his hand and jerked to a sitting posture, instantly wide awake. He blinked at the light, then swept a glance over Henry's bedraggled figure and snickered.

"Eh, man! You look like you've been swimming with your clothes on."

Henry took off his hat and shook the rain from it. His clothing was plastered to his short, muscular figure like a second skin, and was dripping moisture like an overloaded sponge, while his handlebar mustache drooped dejectedly on either side of his rock-like chin.

"Hokay," he grunted. "So I look lak' hell, me. I know it!"

He walked over to the desk, opened the bottom drawer and took out the sheriff's private bottle. He helped himself to a stiff drink, made a wry face and held the bottle up to the light.

"*Ma foi!*" he exclaimed through puckered lips. "I plumb fo'get that Vicou, he's always load his liquor wit' quinine to keep off the malaria shakes."

"It'll maybe keep you from taking cold, with all those wet clothes on you," Jimmy suggested. "Better let me run over to the jail and see if I can rustle you a dry change among the deputies."

Henry shook his head, placed the bottle on the desk and peered through the window into the rain-streaked darkness. "They ain't no needcessity fo' that," he demurred. "I gotta go out again right soon. And I cain't get no mo' wet than I already am. *Mais non.*"

He selected a cigar from the humidor, lit up and seated himself in the sheriff's chair. Elevating his feet on the desk, he told his assistant of his recent adventure.

Jimmy snickered. "Looks like you made a bum guess."

Henry sighed heavily, he felt somewhat deflated over the whole affair, and at the same time relieved that he hadn't made a bad situation worse by putting handcuffs on Ferrier. That, he realized, would have been unpardonable.

"Well," Jimmy consoled him, "after all, you rescued Ferrier from an uncomfortable predicament. He ought to feel grateful."

Henry nodded, glowering under his bushy eyebrows at his grinning assistant as he recalled one of the D. A.'s repetitious statements that some people were incapable of premeditated murder. And his recent talk with Ferrier convinced Henry that the lawyer was one of these.

He took another dose of the sheriff's chill tonic and said:

"Somebody is try his damnedes' to hang a frame aroun' that wan's neck. And I t'ink, me, I know who that feller is. Yes."

Jimmy snapped to his feet. "Well, what are we waiting for?" He glanced at the desk clock, the hands of which pointed to ten minutes past three "Or are you reluctant to bust up some guy's beauty sleep?"

Henry lifted his feet off the desk, took another swallow from the bottle and returned it to the drawer. Rising, he said:

"Firs', we go look at a car in the hotel garage." He opened a closet behind the desk, lifted out a rubber raincoat and handed it to Jimmy. "No needcessity fo' yo' getting all wet. Yo' got that bum check handy, yes?"

Jimmy took the envelope from his shirt pocket. He said, "I put the check with that bit of burned paper."

"Hokay." Henry tucked the envelope inside the sweatband of his hat. "Le's go."

They left the office and descended to the lobby. Henry grunted angrily as a lanky figure rose from the wooden bench outside the door of the tax assessor's office and he recognized the gangling shape of Andrew Jackson Fortier. "Species of camel, don't you ever sleep?"

"I figure, me, they's somet'ing cookin', Cap'n Henry," Old Hickory declared humbly. "I'm wanting in. Yes."

Jimmy snickered. "Criminy! That guy's got him more ambition than Hitler."

"Well," Henry temporized, "mebbe yo' can help out, at that. Tell yo' w'at yo' can do: jus' tag along about half a block behin' us, so yo' can cover whoever is tailing us. But don't let yo'self be seen. Remember that. We're wo'king on a smot operator."

"I'll do jus' lak' yo' say, Cap'n Henry," Fortier promised dutifully.

Henry nodded and stepped out into the driving rain, followed by Jimmy, and together they hurried toward the corner of Fourth Street, where Henry glanced back, grinning when he observed Old Hickory, with typical Cajan indifference to discomfort, strolling across the courthouse lawn as if he were taking a promenade in balmy sunshine.

They continued on down Fourth Street to the alley and entered the hotel garage, where the night attendant was sleeping in his little office, with his feet on the windowsill. As they entered, the man shook himself awake, rose and regarded them with drowsy eyes.

"W'atcha want?" he inquired.

"Firs'," Henry informed him, "we want to see Meestaire Ferrier's car."

"Right over here." The attendant led them to a row of cars parked against the back wall of the garage.

Henry opened the right-hand door of the lawyer's sedan and looked inside. The first thing he noticed was the little door of the glove compartment hanging open. Henry asked:

"How come that leetle do' she's stay open lak' that?"

"The lock's broke," the man enlightened him. "Mr. Ferrier lost the key some time back, an' had to break the lock of the compartment to get at some papers he'd put there."

"Yo' ever notice he's keep a leetle gun in there?" Henry quizzed.

"Sure. Somebody swiped it."

"Yo' certain about that, yes?"

"I ain't likely ever to forget it," the attendant grinned. "Mr. Charley raised so much hell about it that I damn' near lost my job."

HENRY looked over the other cars, his interest sharpening when he noticed a black Ford coupe near the end of the line.

"That coupe, she's belong to Mamzelle Berthe Reynaud, yes?" he queried.

The garage man shook his head. "That's Mr. Shippey's car."

"Shippee, yes?" Henry murmured. "I didn't know he had him a car, that wan."

"He hasn't had it out since Saturday evening," the attendant revealed.

Henry and Jimmy exchanged glances. The ex-marine grinned.

"Looks like your latest hunch is beginning to shape up," he said.

Henry walked over to the black coupe and opened the right-hand door. Reaching into the door pocket, he drew forth a pair of shell-rimmed glasses and a small cardboard box. He lifted the lid of the box, his lips puckering in a silent whistle when he saw that it contained a false brown mustache.

"Eh, man!" he chuckled. "If this ain't jus' wan mo' frame, we ought to have the case close' befo' breakfas'. Yes." He slammed the car door shut. "Come on, we're going to open us an office."

They walked back through the alley to Fourth Street and turned north. Henry paused on the corner and looked for some sign of Old Hickory. He caught a glimpse of the young deputy standing beneath the darkened marquee of the Trianon Theater, just east of the hotel.

"If that *brulee* jus' stays where he is now," Henry whispered, "we'll be able to keep him out of our hair. Yes."

"He's beckoning," Jimmy warned. "We'd better find out what he wants."

They moved up the street and halted under the theater marquee, where Old Hickory stood well back in the shadows. He hissed:

"A feller has bin tailing y'all."

"So?" Henry muttered. "Yo' know who he is, yes?"

"I couldn't see his face, me," the deputy said. "He's wearin' a tan raincoat, him."

He added, "Another feller jus' lef' the hotel and walk' down to'ds the levee. He had him a raincoat, too, and was carryin' an ombrella."

"Yo' sho' he didn't go up in the Lejeune Building?"

"Dead sho'," Old Hickory confirmed. "He kep' right on and tu'n' the co'ner of Third Street. Yes. I couldn't see his face, on account of the ombrella."

"Hokay," Henry said, "here's w'at we do: Jimmy, he walks back to the cou'thouse. Yo' stay here ontil yo' see Jimmy start to follow me. Then yo' follow Jimmy and keep him in sight. Me, I'm going to stick ma neck out."

"I keep you in sight," Jimmy suggested. "If anyone follows you, I keep behind him until he starts something. That the caper?"

"Yo' got the idea," Henry agreed. "Now get going."

He watched the tall young ex-marine walk back toward the courthouse, the rain glistening on his rubber coat. When Jimmy passed from view among the shadows cast by the building, Henry turned and walked west along the square toward the Lejeune Block. Entering the lobby of the little office building, he studied the directory, concentrating on names beginning with S. Having learned what he wanted to know, he returned to the street and walked through the downpour to the corner of Fourth Street, where he stood for several minutes, in apparent indecision, then turned south toward the alley in the rear of the block.

The Lejeune Building occupied the entire block between the alley and the courthouse square, hence it's name. In the rear was a service yard, from which a wooden stairs led upward to a gallery extending clear across the back of the building. Numerous doors opened on the gallery, among them the one Henry sought.

Climbing the stairs, Henry walked along the gallery, peering at the numbers lettered on the glass panels. When he found the right door, he tried the knob and discovered that the door was unlocked. Stepping across the threshold, he closed the door and pushed the wall switch, flooding the small room with light. Then he turned toward the desk and froze in his tracks.

Seated in the swivel chair, with his back to the desk, a huge automatic in his right hand aimed at Henry's belt buckle, was Elmer B. Denn.

FOR a moment, Henry was too astonished to move. He stood there, with rain water dripping from his clothing and forming a pool about his feet. Until that moment, he had been priding himself upon having at last settled upon a definite suspect. But the presence of Denn in Shippey's office, together with a large and businesslike automatic, called for a hasty revision of his theory.

Denn inquired softly, "Lookin' for somebody?"

Henry nodded slowly. Aware that Jimmy was not far behind him, he already had settled upon a definite course of action.

"I reckon, me," he drawled, "I've bin looking fo' yo' right along. Only I didn't know that ontil jus' now. Yes."

Denn got up, keeping his gun trained on Henry. "Put your hands up and turn your back," he ordered. When Henry obeyed, he jerked the six-shooter from Henry's scabbard, patted him about the chest in search of a shoulder-holster and then pushed him roughly toward an empty chair. "Country cops!" Denn added sneeringly. "Ain't even got sense enough to stay in outa the rain." He sat down again in the swivel chair, his eyes glittering malevolently through the lenses of his gold-framed spectacles. "So you didn't know it until now?" he sneered. "Well, Bud, that's just too damn bad—for you, that is." He dropped Henry's gun carelessly into a desk drawer.

Henry studied him, marveling at the subtle change in the man. Gone now was his former air of bucolic simplicity. Instead, he seemed younger, more sophisticated, his face a brick-red mask of ruthlessness.

The telephone rang. Swiveling his chair around, Denn lifted the receiver, never once taking his eyes off Henry. He spoke into the mouthpiece: "Yes? Uh-huh, I know. He's here. Everything under control. Okay. Hurry."

Replacing the telephone, he declared in a conversational tone to Henry, "That was Shippey.

He's bin tailin' you for the last half hour. When that lawyer feller came in a while ago, I figured something was wrong, and sent Ship out to see what it was. Glad I did now." He grinned at Henry and added, "You're slick, all right. But not slick enough to get the better of ol' Elmer B. Denn. No, sir-ee!"

Henry shrugged. "Y'all shouldn't have tried to hang that frame on Charlee Ferrier. That was bad. Yes."

Denn grinned. "That was Ship's idea. I figure we coulda swung the deal without any o' them fancy didoes." He frowned thoughtfully and added, "We may have to knock him off, too, if he tries to fight us."

HENRY now realized that he had erred in believing that the murderer of Dominique Voisin had tried to gain possession of Waldrup's check only because he feared that his handwriting above the dead man't signature might be identified.

"Reckon y'all plan to blackmail Mamzelle Voisin into letting yo' have the oil rights on har property, yes?" he probed.

Denn pursed his lips and frowned judicially. "Well," he said slowly, "you can't exactly call it blackmail. I called her up last night, a while before Larcade was knocked off, and let her know the kinda hand he was holdin'. Boy! She sounded over the phone like she'd hit the ceilin', when I sprung my proposition. But she toned down when I told her about her dearly beloved cousin helpin' to hornswoggle me outa eighty thousand dollars. Anyway, she agreed to meet me in town here, at her lawyer's office, the day after the funeral, which, I guess, will be tomorrow."

"She cain't mak' any decision lak' that," Henry pointed out. "It will be up to Charlee Ferrier, the administrator. And he won't fall fo' yo' game. Not him."

Denn shrugged. "Reckon we'll have to knock him off, too," he decided cheerfully. "We're too deep now to let another killin', or a dozen killin's, for that matter, gum up our proposition."

The door swung inward, letting in a gust of rain. Shippey stepped into the office, shut the door and grinned at Henry.

"Hello, sucker!" he greeted.

Denn inquired anxiously, "What about his pardner, the young feller?"

"He went back to the courthouse," Shippey declared. "I watched for him, but he didn't come out again. Guess he went somewhere to sleep."

"How about gettin' your car?" Denn suggested. "We gotta have a car to run this shamus outa town."

The other shook his head in violent protest. "Hell, no!" he exclaimed. "I'm not stickin' my neck out like that. The guy in the hotel garage might remember I got my heap out. And I don't want any kick-back. We gotta do this job clean."

"Well, get a car—any car," Denn snapped impatiently. "Only for Pete's sake, hurry it up. We gotta get this guy put away an' back in town before daylight. And it's after four now. Get goin'!"

Shippey went out again. As the door closed behind him, Henry asked, "Yo' kill' that Waldrup, yes?"

Denn shook his head. "That was Ship's job. Waldrup wanted too much. So Ship knocked him off."

"How come that Shippee fix himself up lak' Willie Campion?" Henry inquired. "Jus' w'at was the sense of that?"

"Just a handy disguise," Denn explained. "Them glasses an' the fake mustache fixed him up so good that his own mother wouldn't a-knowed him. Lookin' like that Campion guy was merely incidental."

HENRY nodded, his eyes, peering through slitted lids, fixed on the automatic in Denn's hand. He realized now that Shippey, sitting behind the wheel of his black coupe, and wearing glasses and a false mustache could easily have been mistaken for Willie Campion.

"I cain't onderstan', me," Henry drawled,

"why that wan need' a disguise in the firs' place."

"He was scared somebody from Sellierville might recognize him in company with Voisin," Denn revealed. He grinned and added, "That sorta balled things up for you guys, eh?"

"Thass right," Henry admitted. "But they's still a lotta things I don't know, me. Mebbe yo' mak' everything clear, yes?"

"I don't know why I should admit a damn thing," Denn grunted. "But I reckon it's like givin' a condemned guy his choice o' ham an' eggs or chicken before he utters some famous last words. What d'you wanta know?"

"I figure it lak' this," Henry said. "I jus' lak' to know how close I'm come to being right. Yo' fin' out about the Voisin property, about ol' Claude saving the oil in the ground fo' his gal. So yo' decide to get them oil rights away from her. Yes. Yo' an' Shippee and Waldrup get Dominique Voisin in a poker game, and fix things so he wins fifty thousan' dollars from Waldrup, who pays him off wit' a bum check. Hokay?" He paused and looked questioningly at Denn.

"That's about right," Denn confirmed.

"Nex' day," Henry continued, "Dominique he tries to cash that check and is throw' out of the bank. Waldrup, lak' yo' say, wants too much and is kill' by Shippee, who figures Dominique will be blame' fo' the murder, on account of Waldrup giving him a phony check. While Dominique, he is drunk, Shippee writes in the option clause over his signature. But Shippee, he is scare' that Dominique, he will be arrest' by the N'Awlyins cops and talk out loud. So he carries Dominique back to Sellierville and kills him in Berthe Reynaud's garage. Hokay?"

Denn grinned. "You're still warm. Go on."

"Shippee, he has search' Dominique fo' the check, but he fails to fin' it, because Dominique has hidden it inside his necktie, about the las' place anybody would think of looking. But, somehow, Shippee, he learns I have foun' the check. So he lays fo' me in the cou'thouse and damn near beats ma brains out. But he doesn't get the check. He's scare', too, fo' fear I may have recognize' him. So he steals a car, drives to N'Awlyins and comes back on the bus wit' yo' the nex' mo'ning, in this way establishing an alibi." He paused and looked at Denn, then added, "And there never was any eighty thousan' dollars."

"So far, you've hit the nail on the head," the other admitted. "Damn good thing for us we kept on our toes, like we did. If we hadn't, we'd'a bin on the inside lookin' out before you could say 'scat'." He looked at Henry in grudging admiration and added, "Reckon you ain't as dumb as you look."

"I still cain't figure, me, why Shippee, he's kill that Sam Larcade," Henry probed.

"Ship went up to my room to get the classified section of last Sunday's *Picayune,*" Denn revealed. "He caught Larcade goin' through my stuff. The shyster cracked wise, claimed he knew what was cookin' and wanted in on the proposition. So Shippey plugged him with that little rod he'd swiped outa Ferrier's car about a week back.

"Just about then, that red-headed guy came buttin' in. Ship doused the light and asked him in. He was about to plug Pinky, when the other grabbed the gun and took it away from him. Then Ship beat it away from there, left the hotel the back way and ran down the alley to the building here, where he broke into Ferrier's office and burned some papers in the wastebasket. He wasn't aimin' to frame the mouthpiece, but just to ball things up for you guys. See?"

"He bu'ned that photostat," Henry declared. "I foun' w'at was left of it in the wastebasket." He took off his hat and drew the envelope from inside the sweatband. "I got it here along wit' that check—Wup!" He let the envelope slip from his fingers to the floor. "I was about to tear it up, me."

"Like hell, you were!" Denn grunted. "We've got several prints of that photostat. But the check's more important than anything else, because we need it to prove to that Voisin dame what a crook her dearly beloved cousin was, sellin' something what didn't belong to him. When she sees this, she'll be willin' to give up them oil rights rather than see his name smeared all over the front page as a con game operator."

HENRY pretended to ignore the envelope on the floor between him and Denn. He wanted the other to pick it up, but didn't wish to appear obvious. He remarked conversationally:

"Mamzelle Voisin, she won't tu'n loose oil rights worth millions, mebbe, jus' to keep Dominique's name outa the papers."

"She'll come across, all right," Denn declared confidently, "when we show her what we've got on her dearly beloved cousin. We'll sell the oil rights to one of the big companies, who'll pay her royalties, so she won't be out anything but the lease payment. See." Holding the gun on Henry, he stooped and reached with his left hand for the envelope.

That was exactly as Henry had planned. His right foot jerked up from the floor, and the toe of his shoe impacted sharply against Denn's chin.

Denn clutched instinctively at the arm of his chair, slumped to the floor and brought the chair crashing down on top of him. Dazed, he squeezed the trigger of his pistol and sent a bullet crashing into the wall.

Henry popped out of his chair, planted a foot on Denn's right wrist, pinning his gun hand to the floor. Then he stooped and twisted the weapon from the man's limp grasp.

He jerked erect and swung the automatic to cover the entrance as the door slammed violently inward and Jimmy Bourdelon sprang into the room, pistol in hand.

He pulled up short and watched Henry lift the swivel chair off Denn. Then he said, "I've been standing outside the door for the past ten minutes. I heard everything he said."

"Hokay." Henry stuck Mr. Denn's automatic inside the waistband of his trousers, then dragged the handcuffs from his right hip pocket and snapped them about the dazed man's wrists. "W'at about that Shippee?"

The ex-marine explained, "Ol' Hickory is holding him in the alley. I was about to start up the back steps when I heard Shippey coming down. So I ducked behind a pile of empty boxes and slugged him as he passed. Then I called Ol' Hickory and turned Shippey over to him."

Henry retrieved his gun from the desk drawer and returned it to its scabbard. He sat down in the swivel chair, feeling suddenly weary and cold and depressed, now that there was no longer any need for him to keep going. He looked morosely down at Denn, and thought of what a happy world this would be if only people would refrain from killing each other.

Denn struggled to a sitting posture, stared at the handcuffs and groaned. "Good granny! This is awful."

"Sho' is," Henry concurred wearily. "But yo' went into this beezness wit' yo' eyes open. So yo' ain't got nobody to blame but yo'self. Yo' had no pa'tner but Shippey. He fo'ged that power-of-attorney, and stole Sam Larcade's seal to mak' it look good. Eh, man, y'all musta bin cooking up that beezness fo' months. Yes."

"Listen, Chief," Denn pleaded, "can't you and me make a deal?"

Henry shook his head. "The only deal yo' can mak' is wit' yo defense lawyer," he declared. "So far as I am concern', this beezness is jus' about wound up." He hooked his fingers in Denn's coat collar and hauled him to his feet. "I always figure, me, that things get worse befo' they get better. But fo' yo', they'll jus' keep on getting worse. Le's go!"

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

(*Continued from page 55*)

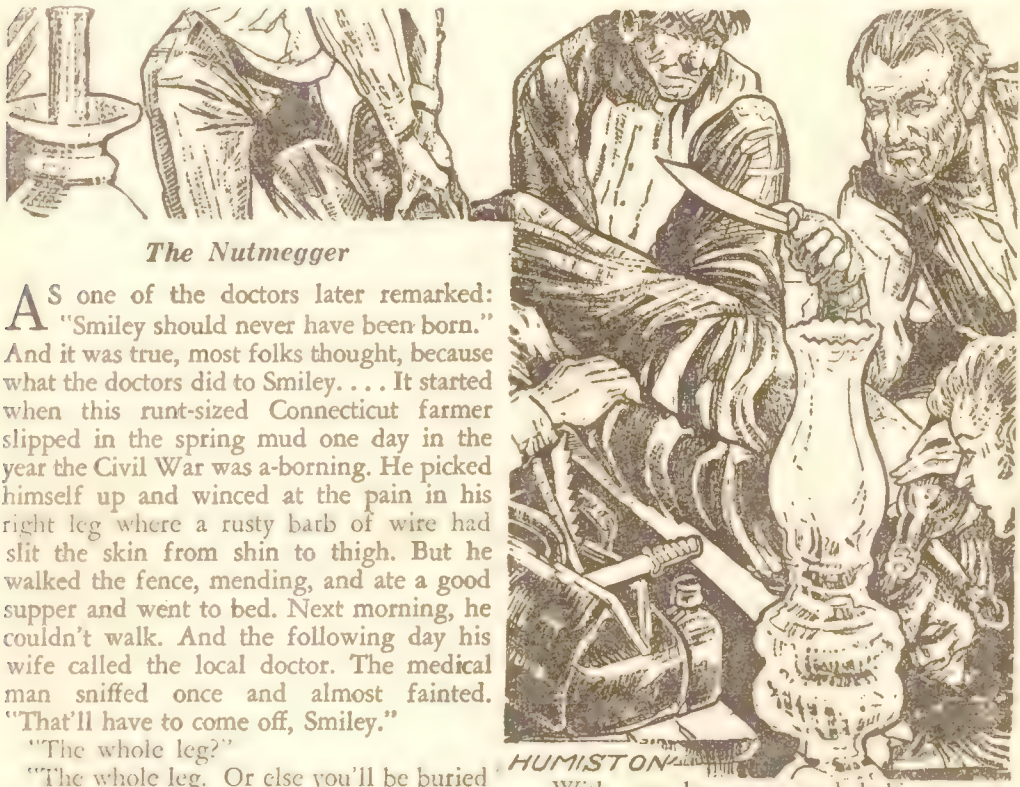
To Eject the Empty Cartridge.—The hammer is struck a sharp blow with the palm of the hand, thus the front end of the breech block is lowered, as in loading, and the fired case flies out with quite some force.

This Lee rifle is an interesting piece and not so bad-looking either, considering that it is a military job made primarily for strength.

Take it easy now, while I try to dig up something interesting for next issue!

MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell



The Nutmegger

AS one of the doctors later remarked: "Smiley should never have been born." And it was true, most folks thought, because what the doctors did to Smiley. . . . It started when this runt-sized Connecticut farmer slipped in the spring mud one day in the year the Civil War was a-borning. He picked himself up and winced at the pain in his right leg where a rusty barb of wire had slit the skin from shin to thigh. But he walked the fence, mending, and ate a good supper and went to bed. Next morning, he couldn't walk. And the following day his wife called the local doctor. The medical man sniffed once and almost fainted. "That'll have to come off, Smiley."

"The whole leg?"

"The whole leg. Or else you'll be buried with it." So they strapped Smiley down and hacked off his leg, pouring rum into his mouth when he opened it to shriek. He sobered and mended at about the same time, according to his recollection; and in the spring of the following year, volunteered when Father Abe asked for a hundred thousand men. He was turned down, of course, and went back to his fields with a disgusted limp.

Three cavalrymen, a sergeant and two troopers, turned up on recruiting patrol and asked Smiley if he could fix a broken cinch. He fixed the cinch and sent them off, but his hand began to swell where he'd cut it. Within hours, he couldn't close his fingers. The doctor came again, took one look and brought out a bottle of rum.

"Again?" Smiley asked wearily.

"Again."

With one leg gone and half an arm, he farmed his place through the war. There was a victory celebration one night, and Smiley broke his good leg getting home. He refused to have the doctor at all, at all; and the leg mended in a bent position. So Smiley carved his wooden leg in like manner, and for years in the Housatonic Valley, people would answer your "Who's that?" with "A Greek named Parentheses."

And Smiley would wink and say "Cuss if you want, but Nutmeggers're tough."

". . . and We'll Jump All Those Claims on Frying Pan"

STEAMBOAT STAMPEDE

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

THE hum of machinery stopped and Jerry Bryant heaved a sigh. He had failed again in business. In a few minutes the men would come in to get their pay checks. "I couldn't even make a brickyard pay out," Jerry told himself in a bitter voice. "Ye gods! Can't you succeed at *anything?*" He answered, "Apparently not!"

The fact that the two previous owners had also gone broke made no difference to Jerry. His father, Judson J. Bryant—Old Jay-Jay—had put him in charge of the brickyard to make a modest profit, or at least break even, but figures don't lie, and Jerry wasn't liar enough to figure, so the books showed a loss of one thousand dollars and some odd cents.

Of course it was common knowledge that Old Jay-Jay was a sucker when it came to buying up a business that was on its last legs. Just tell him that a store or plant would shut down and a number of men would be thrown out of their jobs, and he wanted to do something about it. If an owner who wanted to unload could just get Jay-Jay out to the plant, where he could see the worried employees, and their children happily playing in front of modest homes, the gasping business was as good as sold.

Old Jay-Jay would then give it blood transfusions in the form of cold cash and presently the patient would be sitting up with a pillow at its back. The trouble was, unless Jay-Jay stayed on the job himself, the patient usually suffered a relapse.

Jay-Jay had his limitations, and as a rule someone had to take over the management. Managers lacked Jay-Jay's skill in stopping the small financial leaks that are the margin between success and failure. The best managers sometimes kept the patient alive for months or even years.

Occasionally Jay-Jay would hit a jackpot, which more than made up for his losses. Of late, he had been dumping responsibility onto the shoulders of his only son and heir, Jerry. And Jerry invariably watched the patient's dying gasps.

Take the small town water works that his father had bought from a receiver at fifty cents on the dollar. People had to have water; it wasn't something you could put off buying like a new car. Jerry could smell success.

And he might have succeeded, too, but for the fact a gang stole a mile of new watermain that was in the ditches and tested successfully for leaks.

The ditches had been filled. Imagine his consternation when the water was turned on, and a spring gushed forth. Imagine his second consternation when workmen dug down to locate the leak and found the main missing.

He shuddered when he recalled the combination hardware and grocery store his father had given him to manage. No one stole the stock, but expenses were heavier than sales. More red ink!

THEN there was the turkey ranch. Three weeks before Thanksgiving, someone got the herders drunk, then departed with truckloads of bronzed gobblers. After that, Jerry had found himself managing a hat store.

It was about this time that men began going without hats.

"I'm a square peg in a round hole," Jerry groaned as the last brickyard worker picked up his check and left the office. "If I don't taste success pretty soon, the devel-

opment of my inferiority complex will have been completed."

Of course he had to go home and report to his father. And how he dreaded it! "Sure as hell," he gloomily predicted, "he'll have picked up another sick business, and I'll be detailed to go on duty. I'm practically a visiting nurse." He began packing the firm's books and files into boxes.

In due time his father would go through them without comment, but every time he discovered where a costly mistake had been made his heavy, black eyebrows would jerk up in amazement.

Several days later Jerry arrived in his home town. He stopped at a bar a block from his father's office and ordered a stiff drink. He downed it. "Fill her up again," he ordered, "a bird can't fly on one wing and I've got some tough flying ahead of me."

HE SLIPPED in through a side door and edged up to the firm's treasurer. "I'm back. The books will be along. I'm not cut out for business, Mr. Chesterfield."

"You haven't found the right one," Mr. Chesterfield said. "And in the meantime your business education is progressing nicely. You have your father's—shall I say crusader's zeal—in wanting to provide payrolls? Some of these days you'll find yourself, then all hell can't stop you."

"Have the men in the white coats been here lately?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Jerry," Mr. Chesterfield said.

"I mean has the ambulance backed up with a sick business, and will I be called?" He knew instantly from the treasurer's expression that he should brace himself for the worst.

"I'm very much afraid such is the case," Mr. Chesterfield admitted. The sadness in his eyes plainly said, "Jerry, my heart bleeds for you."

"What is it this time?"

"I think, perhaps, your father should tell you," Mr. Chesterfield answered. "He is in there now, studying a map of Alaska."

"No! No!" Jerry protested. "He hasn't bought a broken down gold mine!"

"Worse than that, Jerry, much worse than that," Mr. Chesterfield said.

Jerry entered his father's office and managed to look cheerful. "The brickyard is defunct," he reported.

"Too bad! Too bad!" Jay-Jay Bryant shook hands with his son. "I hope the men found other work."

"I lined up jobs for several of them with families," Jerry answered.

"Fine! Fine! You are a man after my own heart," Jay-Jay said, beaming. Then he grew business-like. "Right here," he said, jabbing a finger on the Alaskan coastline is, "Little Bay. Supplies for a new gold camp called Frying Pan are landed here and shifted to the backs of mules and horses. First, they climb to Snow Pass, then they proceed through some of the world's toughest country to Frying Pan. It is a poor man's camp. Do you know what I mean by a poor man's camp?"

"Yes, it is a placer proposition that can be worked with pick, shovel and gold pan."

"And—sluice box," Jay-Jay explained. "No money is required to get down to the gold. Later, it'll be a rich man's proposition. Do you understand what I mean by that?"

"Yes. After the surface stuff has been mined, the dredges come in. Dredges run into important money," Jerry answered.

"In this case, quite a number of families will live in the Frying Pan country for fifteen or twenty years," Jay-Jay continued. "It means good homes, stores, a church or two and a school house. Fine! Solid! American! A regular payroll!"

"Two young and very worthy fellows named Sheridan & Morgan figured the cost of landing supplies by pack train, over the years, would be tremendous," Jay-Jay went on.

"And Sheridan & Morgan went broke trying to put across their proposition, whatever it was," Jerry thought, "and Jay-Jay Bryant has bought the assets."

"They reasoned that a small, river steamboat could cut costs substantially and eventually return a handsome profit," Jay-Jay continued. "Imagination! A willingness to risk! That's what made America what it is today. And—employment to a number of men. We put in an equal amount of money. They packed a portable sawmill over Snow Pass, cut lumber and built a boat and barge. They reduced a steam engine to parts and packed them over. The

boiler was something else. It can't be reduced to small parts. By block, tackle, crowbars and the Lord knows what else, they moved that boiler over the pass, also."

"Then they went broke," Jerry said.

"For years, one, Whole-Hog Hadden and his outfit have been cleaning up on new strikes. Miners are in a hurry and like to travel light—first come, first served in the matter of staking claims, you know," Jay-Jay said. "Knowing this, the Hadden bunch followed them in with supplies and made them pay through the nose. Do you follow me?"

"Yes. I've met the Hadden breed. It plays a sure thing and isn't above starting a false stampede to get rid of supplies on hand," Jerry said. "It's hard to prove trickery, though you're dead sure."

"Yes, the miners end up realizing reputedly rich ground is worthless and they've paid the freight in time and money," Jay-Jay said.

"What's the set-up now?" Jerry asked.

"Sheridan & Morgan built their steamer and freighted in their supplies—tons of them," Jay-Jay answered. "Miners passing that way couldn't help but see what was going on. They asked questions and decided to wait and go downstream on the steamer instead of fighting their way over bad country. They liked the price the boys were going to charge for grub, too. So they paid fare in advance to make sure they'd be aboard on the steamer's maiden trip."

"What happened?"

"Mysterious leaks developed in the boat's hull; parts were missing from the engine; and the boiler developed leaks," Jay-Jay answered. "Well there was only one thing to do—return the advanced fares and when that was done, they were broke. They'd operated a little on that money. They'd send men downstream to cut wood for fuel."

"My guess is that Whole-Hog Hadden's men were behind all that," Jerry said. "He had a good thing; a couple of young fellows come along and threaten to upset it. He acts."

JAY-JAY gave his son a long, searching gaze. "Got something on your mind, son?" he asked.

"Yes, I have," Jerry admitted. "I look at things this way. You're packing a big load. I'm supposed to carry part. So far, even the little loads you give me make me bow-legged. Give me a shot at this mess and if I don't deliver the goods—and I mean deliver the goods, by steamboat, to Frying Pan—then you'd better pick some likely young fellows to run your business, because we'll know that I haven't the stuff."

"Doggoned if I don't believe you mean it," Jay-Jay said. "Well, you own a steamboat, son. Your job is to get her downstream to Frying Pan, without wrecking her, or drowning anybody. Hell! I just thought of something. You don't know how to run a steamboat."

"The country is full of river steamer men," Jerry answered, "but none of them ever skippered a boat down Snow River. I can miss as many rocks and bars as they can."

Jay-Jay looked at a timetable. "There's a steamship sailing for Alaska Saturday morning, Jerry," he said. "Every day counts. Can you be aboard?"

"I'll be aboard," Jerry answered.

JERRY BRYANT, carrying a sack of mail, and another sack containing his belongings, stepped into a box-like device containing a hard, wooden seat. "Hang on," the mate said, and a moment later winches rattled and Jerry found himself high above deck. The boom swung out over the side, the winchman slacked away, and the box met a smallboat's deck as it was lifted high on a wave crest.

Two dispirited men, Jerry's age, came out of the cabin. Each carried a bag, and each wore a black, untrimmed beard. "Come on, Sheridan," one said, "let's get aboard quick, and the hell out of the country. If I never seen Alaska again, it'll be too soon to suit me. Alaska, the land of the tin can and dog, and the doublecross."

The man addressed as Sheridan glared at the mountains which seemed to leap, dripping from the sea. "For two cents I'd go back and take another shot at the country," he said. "What do you say, Morgan?"

"No, I know when I'm licked," was the reply.

Jerry recognized the names and he liked Sheridan's looks, the defiant set of his jaw.

He reached into his pocket, found a couple of pennies and handed them to the man. "Here's your two cents, Mister," he said softly, "come along with me. I'm taking my first shot at the country, and you'd be taking your second. I've never succeeded at anything I've tackled. How about you?"

"Neither have I," Sheridan admitted.

"I'm Jerry Bryant, old Jay-Jay's son," Jerry said. "And you must be Scott Sheridan." They shook hands.

"What about it, Morgan?" Sheridan asked his companion. "Why not throw in with Bryant and me and take another shot at the country?"

"No," Morgan replied resolutely, "the cards are all stacked against a square shooter. You can't beat Whole-Hog's game."

"If either of you birds *is* going with us," the mate of the steamer yelled down to the smaller craft, "come aboard!"

Morgan shook hands with Sheridan and said, "Good luck. And that goes for you, too, Bryant. I hope you don't think I'm yellow. I just size up the odds, and if they look unreasonable, I pull my freight."

"Any man who has failed as many times as I have," Jerry answered, "isn't likely to call another man yellow."

The winchman took up the slack and when the smaller craft was once more on a wave crest, opened the throttle. The boat dropped away, leaving the box swinging in the air. The boom swung it aboard and they saw Morgan and his bag making his way to the purser's office.

"Alaska's gained one man and lost one," Jerry commented. "A country can't get ahead at that rate."

"It all depends on the individual," Sheridan answered. "Sometimes you find two men wrapped up in one package."

AS their gasoline-powered boat turned around and headed for the shore, Jerry looked again at the mountains. The notch high above must be Snow Pass. "And you really packed a boiler over that pass!" he exclaimed.

"What a job!" Sheridan said. "And for what?"

"That's what we're going to find out," Jerry answered.

As they neared the shore the water shoaled and the waves grew larger. Here and there the crests began tumbling, then breaking. "We'd better get inside," Sheridan advised.

A deckhand tossed a small anchor over the stern, then followed them inside. Jerry felt a sense of alarm as the surf smothered the boat and rolled her almost onto her beam ends. Then she straightened out. "The dragging anchor does it," Sheridan said. "Just as it seems as if the surf would roll over, the anchor snaps the stern around. We're clear of the bar now."

They bucked a river current in a small bay, then tied up at the bank. "There's a reception committee to make this a perfect day," Sheridan said. "Whole-Hog in person."

Jerry saw a man who stood about five feet-seven inches, but must have weighed two hundred pounds. His breadth of shoulders, and the depth of his chest was amazing. His arms looked short, but this was because of their thickness and power. Actually their length was normal. He had a round, solid face, with small, shrewd eyes, and a bashed-in nose.

Jerry could imagine him saddling a mule that had taken a deep breath and held it to insure a loose cinch. He could see him kicking the mule in the stomach, then yanking on the cinch as the air left the animal's lungs. Any load that Whole-Hog packed on a mule would stay. The man looked at Sheridan in amazement; he'd thought he was rid of the man. "So you come back, eh?"

"Yes," Sheridan answered. "I'm backing the new owner—tossing in a little experience that I got the hard way." He turned to Jerry. "There's a shack down here where we can hole up until we get organized."

Sheridan picked up his pack and started off. He was a hundred yards down a narrow trail when Jerry finished arranging his own pack and shouldered it. "Just a minute, you," Whole-Hog Hadden said. "You're a Cheechako—a newcomer to this country. I can see it sticking out all over you. You look at the mountains like you didn't believe they can be that high. Well, they are. It'll tell you something else. The country's tough, and the men are tougher. If you're smart, you'll stay right here and

catch that steamer when it comes back on the southbound trip."

"I'm not that smart," Jerry said evenly.

"It's for your own good," Hadden said, stepping closer. Jerry watched his feet instead of his hands or eyes. That was one quick way of telling when a man was going to start swinging. He can't swing unless he's set. "How much dough have you sunk in that steamboat business?"

"I own the steamer, supplies, lock, stock and barrel," Jerry said.

"Old Jay-Jay Bryant stuck you, eh? He's the biggest damned crook between the Canadian and Mexican borders," Hadden said. "Always unloading worthless property on some sucker—"

"I'm a sucker," Jerry answered, "sucker enough to warn you I'm going to let you have it squarely in that dirty, lying mouth of yours." Though he was warned, Hadden didn't see the punch coming. Behind it was a beautiful snap, backed by the power of Jerry's arm and legs. The blow dumped Hadden into the muck. Jerry waited for him to get up and start swinging. The man either couldn't get up, or else he wanted no more of Jerry. "It happens," the latter said, "Jay-Jay Bryant is my old man. It also happens that he's strictly on the square. If anything he's a sucker—a sucker for young fellows trying to get a start in the world. And even if he were a crook, I wouldn't let the likes of you make remarks about him. I think, I'm going to like this country."

"Want to bet on that?"

"Yep," Jerry answered briefly as he picked up his pack.

HE CAUGHT up with Sheridan as the latter reached the shack. "What's the matter, Jerry, you're breathing hard?" he asked. Jerry related what had happened and Sheridan whistled softly. "You haven't heard the last of that," he predicted. "No one ever socked Whole-Hog and got away with it."

An hour later Jerry was filling a water bucket at a nearby spring. As he straightened up someone's shoulder struck him in the small of the back, and powerful arms pinned his arms to his sides. "I got him, Chalky."

A pasty-faced man stepped from a thicket, saying, "You hold his right arm, Grogan, and I'll take the left."

There was no escaping the men's iron grasp, and Jerry had sense enough not to attempt it. He saved his strength for a later opportunity but it never came. Whole-Hog Hadden sauntered up. "So you think you're going to like this country, eh? I got a different idear. No man knocks me down and boasts of it." He squared off to deliver a haymaker.

"Easy, Hadden," Chalky warned, "if you kill the cuss with one punch you won't have no fun."

"Yeah, that's so," Hadden agreed. He drove a punch into Jerry's stomach. It was a sickening blow, and it made Jerry seethe.

"It takes plenty of courage to hold a man and beat him up," Jerry said evenly. "You birds can't be very tough if you can't stand up man to man and dish it out." He looked Hadden squarely in the eyes. "You, hammered-down runt, you've got a yellow streak down your back a foot wide."

He saw the blow coming, and sensed the fury behind it. It crashed against Jerry's unprotected jaw. He would have dropped if Chalky and Grogan hadn't been holding him up. "Aw now," Chalky groaned, "you went and knocked him out. Now we can't have no fun."

"Hold him up!" Hadden roared. Then he threw punches from all angles, as if the limp man were a punching bag. "That should send him hightailing it back where he come from." He was breathing hard from rage and effort. He watched his victim crumple to the ground as his men relaxed their grasp, then turned on his heel and stalked off.

When Jerry opened his eyes, he felt terribly sick. He was sprawled on a sleeping bag spread on the shack floor. A badly worried Sheridan was working over him. "Take it easy, Jerry. I don't think you've got any broken ribs but you may have. Don't talk."

Jerry remained silent, sometimes half conscious, for nearly an hour, then he related what had happened. "I didn't think Hadden would go after you so soon," Sheridan said. "But you made one hell of a mistake calling him hammered down and yellow."

"No, I didn't,"—Jerry answered slowly.

"He was going to break me up slowly—break my nose, close my eyes, fracture a rib or two. I could see it in his eyes. It was better to make him lose his temper and finish me off with one punch. Sick as I am, I'm better off than he ever intended."

"I'll stay here and take care of you," Sheridan said.

Jerry shook his head. "No, time counts. You relay our stuff upstream and as soon as I can make it, I'll be along. Tomorrow I should be able to pack my own weight, and the next day some of the outfit." He took a deep breath. "It hurts, but I don't think there are any broken ribs."

PACK trains had made a good trail along the river bank. Here and there log bridges spanned small creeks that emptied into the river. Jerry rested often, but late that evening he stumbled into Sheridan's camp. "I saw you coming, and have warmed up a mulligan, and the coffee is ready."

"I'll take coffee and pass up the grub," Jerry said. "I don't feel like eating."

"Sourdough flapjacks in the morning," Sheridan said. "Does that sound good?"

It sounded better the following morning, but Jerry soaked dry bread in a mixture of tinned milk and hot water. "Baby food," he grumbled, "but I can keep it down." He viewed life glumly, figuring the beating had cost them two days because it had slowed them down, and would continue to hold them back.

They pushed through Snow Pass the fifth day, and Jerry was packing his share of the load. "Let's keep going," he said, "I want a look at that steamer."

Sheridan pointed to a haze far below them. "That's the beginning of navigation," he said. "We'd better rest tonight and go through in the morning."

"I just thought of something," Jerry said after putting away a good meal. "Why hasn't Whole-Hog Hadden really seriously damaged the boat?"

"He tried," Sheridan answered. "It was done quietly. He didn't dare do anything openly, the miners would have strung him up to a limb. Damage was mostly leaks and broken engine parts."

"The miners? Are they still hanging around? I figured they'd have given up in disgust and gone on to Frying Pan long ago," Jerry said.

Sheridan lit his pipe. "They held a meeting when we started for Snow Pass with the boiler. They figured that if we got the boiler through, we'd build a steamer," he explained. "They sent certain of their number down to the Frying Pan to stake ground. These men carried powers of attorney. They traveled light, caching their grub on the way. When they staked the ground, they came back, eating the grub they'd cached. The location notices were taken down the coast to the nearest town and filed.

"When we found out the steamer had been damaged, they were all for holding a miners' trial and trying Hadden," Sheridan continued. "Cooler heads stopped that. There was no evidence that a fair man would have considered. And yet, he was the only man likely to damage the steamer. All the others wanted to go downstream on her. Morgan and I returned passage money and sent word to your father that the steamer and freight were his. We expected the miners to follow us out, or start backpacking to Frying Pan, but from the size of that smudge down there, quite a number of campfires are burning. I don't understand it."

WHEN Sheridan came in the next morning, followed by Jerry Bryant, a cheer went up. A man named Bolton, who had natural leader written all over him, thumped Sheridan on the back. "We knew you'd show up with someone. We knew that somebody would put this steamer in shape for the run. People don't leave jobs like this to rot."

"This is old Jay-Jay Bryant's son, Jerry," Sheridan said. "He's had a couple of run-ins with Hadden—dumped him the first time and the second time two of Hadden's men held him while the boss worked him over."

"A fine, upstanding character," Bolton commented.

"Let's check on the steamer," Jerry said. He walked over, followed by the crowd. She wasn't large, but was solidly built, and was grounded on a sandbar free of boulders that might damage her hull. Sheridan had

packed in enough paint to give her hull a coat of black, her deckhouse white, and the stack a bright red. A board on the wheelhouse read, *White Water Nell.* Jerry grinned. Sheridan was humorous in a quiet way. Jerry liked him better as he grew acquainted.

Sheridan brought around a thin, small man with walrus mustache and heavy, black brows. "This is Kehoe, the engineer," he said. Kehoe shook hands and was full of business.

"When Sheridan wrote your father that the steamer was his headache, he sent along a list of engine parts that were either broken or stolen by someone hired by Hadden," Kehoe said. "Did you bring them?"

"They're in the heavy pack," Jerry answered, indicating the pack Sheridan had carried most of the way.

KEHOE spent several seconds sizing up Jerry and finally said, "I hate like hell to accuse a man falsely, but the fireman, Zindorf, doesn't ring true. He could be the man who has done the damage. On the other hand he may be innocent. If you're smart, you'll make every man on this boat prove he's on your side. That goes for me, too." Kehoe's appraisal and swift approval was flattering.

"Thanks," Jerry said. "I don't like to start in assuming all hands are double-crossing me. But if something should go wrong on the run downstream a lot of lives could be lost."

He met Zindorf later. The man was busy helping the engineer install damaged parts. When the job was finished, Kehoe said, "Now we'll check the main bearings."

"When do you plan leaving?" Zindorf asked.

"The first thing tomorrow morning," Jerry answered. Kehoe looked startled, and Jerry added, "Just keep the news under your hats. I may change my mind." He turned to Kehoe. "I'd like you to stand watch to make sure no one tampers with the engine. Zindorf can keep an eye on things from midnight to six o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Good idea," Kehoe said, and the fireman nodded in agreement.

Zindorf relieved Kehoe shortly before midnight. "Bryant's orders are to let no one aboard," the latter said. "I'm sleeping ashore tonight."

"If those are the orders," the fireman said, "I won't let my own father on her."

He made himself comfortable in the engine room and read an hour, then he looked carefully around the decks and returned to the engine room. Here anyone observing him would have seen him removing the cap on a main bearing, lifting the upper half of the bearing exposing the shining, well-oiled shaft. He poured emery dust on the shaft, replaced the upper half of the bearing—and then the lights suddenly went out.

PRESENTLY he found himself blinking at them and wondering why his jaw ached. He was sitting on the floor, his back against part of the engine. "How'd I get here?" he muttered. "And what happened to the lights?"

"Nothing happened to the lights," Jerry Bryant said quietly. "I just popped you one, is all. I stuffed myself in the shaft alley a few minutes before you went on duty. When you walked around the boat I shifted to a more comfortable spot and waited. I let you finish your job so there'd be no doubt of your crookedness. If that bearing had gone out downstream in the white water, men would have been drowned. I'm going to turn you over to the miners and tell them the story. The evidence is here to back up my words."

Zindorf turned pale. "They'd string me up," he blurted.

"Get down on your knees and beg," Jerry ordered.

The man was sitting, but he turned over and was on his knees. Jerry regarded him with contempt. "I didn't think you were that yellow," he said. "Get up!" The man got up, his lips twitching with fear. "I don't want you mobbed, and that's what'll happen if this story gets out."

"I'll hide in the brush," the man said. "You're pulling out in the morning."

"No. We can't get ready in that time," Jerry answered. "I told you that to force your hand—to hurry you if you were up to something. Alaska isn't big enough to hide in, Zindorf. Now get out."

The man left, with Jerry at his heels. He crossed the gangplank and disappeared into the darkness. He walked rapidly, with

his right arm half extended to ward off branches hanging over the trail. Two miles from the steamer he turned off the trail and uncovered a cached sleeping bag, pack, and a quantity of food in tins. "It's a good thing I cached this stuff," he muttered. Fear still rode him rather hard. His teeth chattered whenever he opened his mouth. He slipped his shoulders through the pack straps and took a faint game trail.

By noon he had come to the pack-train trail that Whole-Hog Hadden had blazed to Frying Pan. A Hadden packer hailed him. "They got next to you, huh? What'd they do, beat you up? You look scared to death. Look at your hands shake."

"Aw go to hell," Zindorf retorted. "They figgered to throw me to the mob. I talked 'em out of it. Where's the boss?"

"Up in his tent."

Zindorf thrust his head between the flaps and Hadden growled, "Well, what do *you* want? What happened? Did you jimmy up their engine?"

"Yeah, I jimmied up their engine," Zindorf answered. "Trouble was, I was doin' too good a job and got caught. Talked 'em out of a miners' court trial. They're figgerin' to pull out soon."

"What're they going to do for a fireman? And a river captain?"

"Most anybody can learn to fire a boiler," Zindorf answered. "Maybe Jerry Bryant will skipper the boat. I don't know."

"I'll send McCoy. He's skippered river boats," Hadden said. "Get busy with one of the pack trains. We're short handed."

When McCoy came in, Hadden got down to business. "Your job is to see that that steamer don't get through. I'm taking a bunch of men, damned good men, over the trail. Possession is nine points of the law. We're going to jump those Frying Pan claims."

McCOY boarded the steamer the following afternoon and looked up Jerry. "I'm a river man," he said smoothly. "I'll take anything from deckhand to captain. What's the chance of going to work?"

"Do you know this river?" Jerry asked.

"No one knows this river," McCoy answered. 'It's never been run by anything bigger than a raft or small boat. But I can read water."

Jerry knew what he meant. The expert river man can make a fairly good estimate of the water's depth by its color. He can size up a swirl, or rapids and come close to knowing what is below the surface in the way of boulders. "You're going to take her on a trial run, aren't you?" McCoy asked.

"Why?" He was testing the man's practical knowledge.

"Well, a man has to get the feel of a boat," McCoy said. "Then he knows what she'll do. Sometimes when you're going downstream you have to back your engines and hold her while you maneuver her into a channel. You've got to know how much power she's got."

"I need a skipper," Jerry said. "If you can prove to me you know your business, the job's yours. And from what you say, I think you do."

Two days later the *White Water Nell* was in deep water; steam was popping from the safety valve, and McCoy was at the wheel. Sheridan stood beside him in the wheelhouse, and Jerry was moving about trying to get a complete picture of proceedings. The bank was lined with men.

The propeller was arranged so that it could be lifted into a tunnel built into the hull when the water was dangerously shallow. McCoy lifted the propeller, cleared a bar, and was in deep water. He headed upstream, bucked white water through a canyon, and maneuvered in a big eddy.

"What do you think of him?" Jerry asked the engineer.

"He's a steamboat man," the engineer answered. "And this is one of the finest little boats I was ever aboard." He tugged thoughtfully at his jaw. "I've known McCoys in this game, but I never met or heard of this one before. Well, for that matter, I couldn't know 'em all. There're plenty of good men in the upper Missouri, Snake and Columbia Rivers that never got to Alaska."

"Are you suspicious of him?" Jerry asked bluntly.

"When I'm fighting Hadden," the engineer growled, "I'm suspicious of everyone. Hell, when I squirt oil from a can I expect to see a Hadden man come out."

They tied up to the bank, and McCoy was all smiles. "She's designed right. And

she's got power. Of course, coming back upstream—if we can get her upstream—you'll have to line up in places. And no steamboat line is a success unless it can buck the current up to the head of navigation where the freight and passengers are waiting. Had you thought of that?"

"I've given it plenty of thought," Jerry admitted.

"When do we sail?" a miner yelled from the bank.

"Tomorrow morning at eleven o'clock," Jerry answered. "We'll load general freight tonight, and your outfits the first thing tomorrow morning."

NOT a man, or pound of freight remained on the bank when the gangplank was hauled in the following morning.

A cheer went up from the crowd standing on deck, or sitting on deck cargo. Two huge coils of rope lay on the after deck. "We'll need one in Mist Canyon, and the other coil in Boulder Canyon," Sheridan explained. He had sent men over the ice the previous winter to drill holes in solid rock and embed heavy rings to which lines could be fastened. Sheridan estimated that with luck they could make the run to Frying Pan in twelve hours. The return trip would require at least three days of constant slugging it out with the river.

The steamer moved quietly over a smooth stretch of river. Men got out tobacco and began smoking. Jerry leaned on a wheelhouse window sill and watched the changing scenery. "Look ahead!" he bellowed at the men on deck. "Stampede, sure as hell!"

A long line of men and pack mules twisted like a snake through the scant timber growing on the river bank. Jerry picked up a pair of binoculars, gazed briefly, whistled softly, and handed them down to Sheridan. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

Sheridan's gaze was much longer. "Whole-Hog Hadden and his rough-and-tumble fighters," he answered. "There's only one place they're heading for—Frying Pan."

"Well, what the hell?" a young miner asked. "We've staked and filed location notices on our ground."

"You're young, son," an old miner said, "or you'd have heard of claim jumpers. They're travelin' light. Maybe a big pack train of grub will follow. Or else they're figgerin' us fellows won't be needin' grub, and plan on buyin' it from Jerry Bryant."

"Nothing to worry about," McCoy said. "We'll be there in plenty of time. We're riding in a brand new steamer. They're walking."

As the steamer went into a bend, she was within a hundred yards of the trail which actually followed the river bed around a cliff.

"Want us to mail any letters for you?" a miner yelled.

A chorus of jeers ended abruptly as Hadden turned savagely in the saddle and said something. *White Water Nell* rounded the bend and headed into a canyon. This was the first test. Water hissed and curled as the hull sliced through a series of rapids. There was a creak and groan of cargo, and a tense silence among the men. They were beginning to realize if anything happened, the odds against survival in this icy stream were long ones.

"A beautiful little craft," McCoy said. "She's—"

"Look out!" Jerry warned. "You're going to pile her up on that bar!"

"Who's running this boat?" McCoy retorted.

"You *were*," Jerry answered. He swung quick and fast. McCoy dropped to the wheelhouse floor. Jerry rang for full speed astern, then tried to either miss the bar or lessen the impact. As the propeller bit into the water, the steamer shuddered from the vibration. Then she stuck, and there was a shattering of planks somewhere.

"What happened?" Kehoe asked, coming up from the engine room. Bolton was at his heels.

"McCoy tried to wreck us on the bar," Jerry answered, "and it looks as if he'd done it. I was watching for a crooked move just as a matter of taking no chance with a stranger. There was too much momentum, backed by the current. I couldn't stop her soon enough."

"I got her into reverse as soon as I could," Kehoe said. "I was right at the throttle all the time."

"Sure you were."

"That cuss would look right pretty hang-

in' from a limb by the neck," a Southern miner drawled.

"We haven't time," Jerry said, determined to head off a hanging, "Bolton, you're the leader among the men, form a chain and pass their outfits to the dry part of the bar. Follow it up with freight that can be easily handled. Some of the boys had better build a fire on the beach. The water is cold and part of the men will be working in it waist deep."

"What'll we do with McCoy?"

"McCoy'll settle that problem," the man himself answered. He leaped to his feet, raced to the rail and jumped.

"The fool can't make it," a miner shouted.

"Let the rat drown," Kehoe said.

They all watched McCoy. There was no doubt of it. He was a river man. He took advantage of every trick of the current to carry him across the river to a point within striking distance of the pack-train trail. He disappeared in a smother of white water twice, then crawled to a bar. For several seconds he lay there, then got unsteadily to his feet, the water draining from his clothing in cascades.

"Too bad," Kehoe said in grudging admiration, "a man who knows rivers like he does, and has his nerve, should string with Whole-Hog Hadden."

THEY lightened the steamer and aided by the propeller, winch and all hands heaving on a line, got her up high enough to patch the shattered plank. "How're we going to get her off?" Bolton asked, looking to Kehoe for the answer.

"You've noticed the river level never stays the same," the engineer replied. "In the high mountains, the little streams freeze up a little nights; snow banks stop thawing; and the flow is cut down. When the sun comes out, or they get a warm rain up there, the flow increases. I've been checking, and I think we'll get our highest water tomorrow night, around nine o'clock."

"Nine o'clock!" Sheridan and Bolton yelled at the same time.

"And the Hadden outfit making time over that trail while we're stuck here," Jerry groaned. "Why not tonight?"

"Because there won't be time to get ready," Kehoe explained. "Keep your shirts on, and tomorrow, I'll show you a trick with a hole in it. See that tree on the bank? Cut it! Then trim off all the limbs and bring it down to the steamer. I know you're all tuckered out, but you're going to need that tree."

The men spent the next day growling and panning the bar to kill time. They got colors and one small nugget for their efforts. Long before high water was due, the tree was lashed to the boat. With the greater portion of it extending into the current, it served as a giant lever applying pressure on the stranded craft. As the volume of water increased and the current ran faster, the leverage would also increase proportionately.

A heavy hawser ran from the boat's stern windlass to a boulder in the river. With steam up, the engine turning over at full speed; and men hauling away on additional lines, the winch began hauling in the hawser. It lifted from the stream and dripped water as the pressure squeezed the strands.

"She's moving!" Bolton yelled. "Heave harder! Altogether—now! Yoooo-heave! The current is beginning to work on that tree. She's swinging around."

Suddenly the *White Water Nell* slipped into deep water, and the tree, now acting like a huge rudder turned the boat's bow upstream. Lines running to the bank checked her from being carried off. They brought her back to a point where the water was deep, and began reloading.

The job was finished at daybreak, and Sheridan, Kehoe and Bolton joined Jerry in the wheelhouse. "I guess taking her down to Frying Pan is up to you, Jerry," Sheridan said. "She's your boat. There isn't a river man aboard except Kehoe, and he's an engineer."

"Then I'll start now," Jerry answered. "The water will be lower, but if I pile her up on a bar, higher water may float her off. I watched McCoy constantly. No man can learn to read water and handle a boat in a few hours, but here goes."

He took it easy from the start, experimenting in rapids where it was reasonably safe; watching what the current did in a given set of conditions. He learned that in order to steer the boat, she had to be running a little faster than the current. At times that seemed much too fast, but when

he slowed down, they had a tendency to drift sideways.

Sheridan stood up forward with a long pole which he used to test the depth of the water.

"Here's Mist Canyon," a miner yelled. "You got to stop her dead a hundred yards after you pass that big boulder. Edge her toward the wall. You'll have plenty of depth. That's where I put in the big ring. You'll want to run a line through the ring and around the aft windlass. That's the only way you can check her. If you go through too fast, you'll pile into the wall at the next turn."

The line was coiled so that it could run around the windlass. They took several turns so that by tightening up on the "running" part of the line, the boat's progress could be checked. Small logs suspended from short lengths of rope would serve as fenders—protecting the boat's side from sudden contact with the wall. The air was filled with mist.

JERRY put the engine in reverse as he passed the boulder. Slowly she lost headway, then began moving stern first against the current, though her course continued downstream. When the boat was going stern first at the same rate of speed as the river's flow, the wall opposite appeared to be standing still. The boat drifted into the wall, and the miner ran the hawser's end through the ring embedded in the wall. He made a quick knot while Jerry kept her there, then the men began paying out the line, letting it slip around the windlass—slacking away, then checking as Jerry shouted orders.

It was slow work. And the fight upstream some day in the future would be even slower. Then the engine would have to drive ahead full speed, while the full power of the windlass, winding in the hawser, would be needed to beat the current.

"What was that?" Jerry suddenly asked. "Didn't I hear a shot?"

"Sure did," Bolton yelled from the deck. "Hunt cover, boys."

There could be little cover for Jerry, though the men paying out the line could crouch behind deck houses. The others legged it for the boiler and engine room, or burrowed behind cargo. Sheridan came out with a rifle. "Where's the cuss?" he demanded.

A jet of water leaped up behind them. A moment later, a bullet glanced from the wall and droned overhead. As Sheridan looked, rock splinters leaped from the wall a foot above the iron ring. "I got it, Jerry! They're trying to shoot the hawser to pieces. There it is again! There must be two of them, or even three from the way the lead is hitting." Sheridan stood on deck, rifle gripped in his hands, eyes searching the opposite canyon wall. He located them at last—the tops of three heads visable; three rifle barrels protruding from a break in the rock. "Shall I open up?"

"Go ahead," Jerry ordered. "They probably won't waste lead on us, when a lucky shot may give them a boatload."

Sheridan sat down, back against the deckhouse and sighted the rifle. He got the range by watching chips fly, then he methodically emptied the rifle.

Lead must have come dangerously close, but it didn't stop the men pouring a steady stream of shot at the ring. Suddenly the hawser leaped as it was released from the strain. A bullet had ripped through the strands, and those remaining had parted.

"Get that line aboard before it tangles with the propeller," Jerry yelled. Then to make sure, he stopped the screw until the line was aboard. The boat was moving like a water-logged chip now. Her bow caught against the wall, held momentarily, sending men sprawling, then the boat broke clear, moving broadside downstream.

Jerry rang for full speed astern, and when the propeller caught the bow swung downstream once more. Mist drenched everything, the *White Water Nell* scraped against the wall, tearing off soggy moss and ferns. A waterfall deluged them. Some went down the smoke stack, and clouds of steam came from the boiler room. The fireman yelled, "Who the hell done that?" He came on deck, fighting mad, and pale as a ghost. Cold water in a hot fire box can cause an explosion.

His fire took a beating and the steam pressure went down several pounds. He returned and began stuffing in pitch wood and oiled rags. Another shock sent him to the deck.

A rush of steam began blowing sparks

into the ash pit and over the deck. He yelled at the engineer, "That cold water, or something loosened a flue. Steam's escaping."

Kehoe yelled up the speaking tube. "You got your troubles, Jerry from the crashing I hear, but we've got ours. A flue let go. Beach her! Tie her up! Anything! You can't get through Boulder Canyon, or any part of the river without power."

Jerry began to sweat, and once more the hope the miners had built up began to die. It was bad enough fighting Hadden, without nature adding to the load. But that was what happened when any river boat pioneered a new stream. Even as Jerry looked for a place to beach her, he thought, "I'll have to put some kind of protection over that stack." Then he yelled down at the men. "Grab your sleeping bags and blanket rolls. Wrap 'em tight. They'll make life preservers for a few minutes."

Sheridan stood near the big coil of hawser that was to be used in Boulder Canyon. He picked up the end and said, "Bolton. I got an idea. If I could go over the side and take a turn around one of those boulders, we might stop her."

"You're a damned fool," Bolton said. "You'll drown."

"I can swim and I can stand the cold as well as McCoy could," Sheridan said. "Just give me plenty of slack. Here goes!" A boulder lay just ahead. The boat would pass close. Sheridan leaped. He went down to his armpits, struggled briefly as the current swept him across a pool, then dug in his heels when the water shoaled to a depth of three feet. Bolton fed line over the side faster than the steamer was moving. The current was carrying the bight of the line toward a boulder. Sheridan carried his end beyond the bolder, splashed around it and retrieved some of the loose line floating on the stream. He made a couple of hitches, then stamped the line down to the bottom. He threw up his arms to indicate his gamble had been completed. Jerry used the last of the stream to bring the steamer to a dead stop. Breathing hard, Sheridan crawled along the rope to the boat Hands lifted him aboard, stripped off his clothing and hurried him to the boiler room.

"That took nerve," Jerry said.

"I just hate to be licked," Sheridan answered, shaking violently.

"It wouldn't be the first time a man had lost his life trying to beat Hadden," Bolton said.

"Pull the fire," Kehoe ordered, then because the fireman was green and uncertain, the engineer did the job himself. As soon as the firebox was cool, he went in with hammer and tools and began tightening the flue. Hour after hour the current tugged steadily at the line, while the engineer finished the job and got up steam. Steam pressure was beginning to show, when the line broke near the boat. It had been chafing against a sharp rock at some point where it was caught under water.

Sheridan was warmly dressed, but dog tired, threw up his hands. "What does a bunch of honest men have to do to win a fight in this country?" he groaned. "Am I going to be licked again?"

No one answered. The steamer was drifting through Boulder Canyon sideways, with not enough power to maneuver. "Grab tents, or anything that'll take up a shock," Jerry yelled, "and do what you can to take up blows when we hit."

Some caught up the tightly rolled tents; others twisted and lashed coils of hawser into tight bunches. It took nerve to stand on deck and see boulders coming at you and not hunt cover. But the men using tents and ropes as fenders, stood their ground and took up much of the impact when the steamer hit and glanced off. The guard rail took most of the beating.

The *White Water Nell* was built solidly, but no one expected her to stand up under such impacts. She came out of the canyon stern first, and Jerry looked desperately ahead for either slack water or room enough to swing her about.

Then—miraculously she struck a boulder near the stern, held for a moment and turned herself around. "Now we've got it licked!" Jerry yelled. "I'll use power sparingly until a head of steam can be built up." He gave the wheel a spin and it kept on spinning. The rudder was gone!

The water was deep here, and slower, and the stream almost straight. Sheridan stood at the rail, limp and disgusted. Suddenly he yelled over his shoulder, "We're almost there! See that bend ahead? Fry-

ing Pan is around that. We've got those buzzards licked—if you can land." He seemed to take on both renewed strength and hope.

They saw Frying Pan Creek break through the canyon walls, and caught a glimpse of the valley beyond. There were mountains vaguely visible in the haze, then the current from the creek, pushed the steamer away from the bank.

"What's below?" Jerry asked.

"Lower Canyon," Sheridan answered. "Don't know a thing about it. Everyone stopped at Frying Pan, staked ground and came back. Maybe the worst is yet to come. Wonder what *that* will be like?"

They struck the canyon wall three times in half mile, bounced through a stretch of white water, eddied slowly in a great pool, then gently grounded on a bar. "End of the line," someone yelled in grim humor.

"Speaking of line," Jerry said without smiling, "some of you take our last hawser upstream and lash it to a boulder." He sighed wearily. "I'll see what we can rig up in the way of a rudder."

"Hadden's men must have split their sides laughing when they saw us go by Frying Pan," Bolton said. "Some of them certainly must have arrived. They've had time enough."

"I didn't see a soul," Sheridan said. "But that doesn't mean they weren't there." He offered to lend a hand, but Jerry told him to flop down in a warm spot and rest. He had done more than his share thus far.

The rudder had been knocked completely off and probably lay at the bottom of the river. With the help of a carpenter who was on the stampede; lumber torn out of the steamer; and a tree cut near the bank, an improvised rudder was fitted. No ropes running to the wheelhouse could handle it. Two men, manning the heavy timber cut from the tree, would move the rudder by pushing the timber back and forth.

"Tie down the safety valve," Jerry told Kehoe, "build up all the steam pressure you can. We'll either get to Frying Pan or else blow up the damned boat trying. Incidentally we'll find out whether she's powerful enough to buck her way upstream."

At first *White Water Nell* made fair time against the current, then the rapids held her. The safety valve let go with a roar, and Kehoe said, "You boys get as far away from the boiler as possible." Then he hung another weight on the valve. Inwardly he was praying that the repaired flue wouldn't let go.

He opened the throttle wide and the steamer bucked and heaved its way through the first stretch of white water. A hundred yards upstream, men waited on the bank with the end of the hawser in hand. For twenty minutes the steamer crawled toward the men, then she touched the bank and the men came aboard. They secured the line to the forward power windlass. "Now for the test," Jerry shouted. "Come on old girl and show us what you can do against the water. Any damned boat can go downstream."

The windlass began turning over slowly, reeling in the hawser, while the engine moved the propeller at maximum speed. Steadily the canyon walls slipped past them. A yell of triumph came from the passengers as she crawled from the last of the white water. They cut the hawser and went on.

Once more Frying Pan was around a bend. Jerry nosed the *White Water Nell* up to the bank. "Now what?" Bolton asked.

"We're tired," Jerry answered. "They'll be ready and waiting for us if we try landing from the steamer. Let's cut overland from here and get the jump on them."

"I guess that's a good idea," Bolton agreed. "What do you say, boys?" There was general agreement.

Jerry gave Kehoe a rifle. "If any of the Hadden gang tries to come aboard, or cut the mooring lines, let him have it," he said.

"I'd sooner slug it out on the creek," the engineer said, "but I ain't as young as I used to be. Chances are I'd be a liability in a rough-and-tumble fight. Say, you don't suppose it'll be gunplay, do you?"

"No," Sheridan said, answering the question. "Whole-Hog Hadden will try anything but that. He relies on dirty work, clubs and fists. He's afraid if someone is shot they'll hang something on him."

THE men decided they could fight better on empty stomachs, and followed Jerry to the bank. He climbed a low ridge some-

time later and looked down into the valley. "We'll hit Frying Pan Creek about a mile above the mouth," Sheridan said.

They pushed on to the stream. The claims above Discovery, had been staked, and the old monuments removed. Footprints were so fresh that water hadn't filled them.

They were within a quarter mile of the bank when Jerry called a halt. "Let's rest a minute and talk this over. We're all breathing pretty hard from hurrying. There they are, waiting for us."

They could see men milling around the bank. Nearby the pack-train mules were moving awkwardly about, hobbled. A heap of supplies had been piled on high ground and covered with tarps to keep out the dampness and rain until a store had been built, or the stuff sold to the miners.

"There are certain private accounts to be settled," Sheridan said. "Jerry, you get first crack at the buzzards. I suppose you'd like to take Hadden, Chalky and Grogan in turn, but you can't be a hog about this. You've got to leave some of them for the rest of us."

"There'll be plenty for all," Jerry said. "Hmmmm. I've already dumped Hadden. You can have him, Sheridan. I think I'll take Chalky."

"Let me have Grogan," Bolton said.

They were within a hundred yards of the men before the claim jumpers realized it. Grogan yelled a warning, then Sheridan was racing toward Hadden, and Jerry was knocking men aside to reach Chalky. The man was a fighter or he wouldn't have thrown in with Hadden's outfit.

Jerry broke through his guard and flattened his nose with a clean punch. "That's for holding me while Hadden hit me," he panted. "And this is for the stomach sickness I had afterwards." He had Chalky walking on his heels a moment later, then finished him with a right cross.

There were free-for-alls in which several men on each side slugged whatever enemy was within reach. Jerry clipped a man who seemed to lack an opponent, then turned his attention to Hadden. Sheridan and the man were slugging it out. Sheridan was almost blinded from a cut over his eyes, and Hadden was trying to close in and finish him.

They went down, rolling over and over, and finally Jerry saw Sheridan's shoulders lift, then his fist crashed again and again into Hadden's face. After a while he got up, reeling partly from the beating he had absorbed, but mostly from sheer exhaustion.

"I guess we've got 'em all except McCoy," Jerry said as the beaten men were herded into a sullen group. "Where's McCoy? He didn't drown. He must've joined Hadden."

McCOY came out of a thicket, unmarked from fighting. He had hidden out, and now he walked up to Jerry. "Swing on me with everything you've got." He made a pass at Jerry and went down from a punch to the jaw. He got up. "Swing again, Jerry," he said. As Jerry hesitated, McCoy let drive at his face. Jerry flattened him, and waited for results, a puzzled expression on his face. McCoy was a long time getting to his feet.

"What's back of all this?" Jerry asked.

"I've got it coming," McCoy answered. "I hired out to Hadden to wreck your boat. My conscience wouldn't let me. She was too fine a boat. I planned to beach her instead. I figured that would hold you up, and give Hadden a chance to jump your ground. I guess I just ain't the double-crossing kind of buzzard. I couldn't doublecross a fine boat, and I couldn't do it to Hadden. I'm ashamed. I hope you'll slug me silly every time you see me."

"I'll be damned," Jerry said. "Now that I think of it, you'd have made sure of wrecking the steamer if you'd have gone on a hundred yards and hit a mid-stream boulder." He turned to Sheridan. "What had we better do with him?"

"Keep him with us," Sheridan advised. "He *could* have drowned many of us, and didn't. He's got a decent streak, and if we turn him loose, the Hadden outfit will finish him off."

"Whatever you say," McCoy said. "No matter what it is, I've got it coming."

"Stick with us," Jerry said. "Later, we're going to try to take the steamer upstream with a make-shift rudder. You can square up for a lot of things by helping." He walked over to Hadden. "Load your mules, and get out of here."

"There's no sense in taking back good grub," Hadden said.

"We don't want it," Jerry said. "This is one time you're hit where it hurts most—the pocketbook."

"It isn't worth packing out," Hadden argued. "It'd cost too much. Now be sensible about this. You're going to need plenty of grub in the future, and even with the steamer, the cost will be high."

"Not interested," Jerry said.

Hadden turned to the miners. "Make me an offer for the grub," he said. "No sense in paying the high prices that Bryant will have to charge you if you can get it from me—cheap."

No one answered. "Fifty cents on the dollar." No one answered. "Twenty-five cents on the dollar." No one answered.

"I wouldn't take it from you as a gift," Jerry said, "but I won't see food rot. Five cents on the dollar."

"And he'll charge you suckers a hundred cents on the dollar," Hadden said. "Are you going to stand for that?"

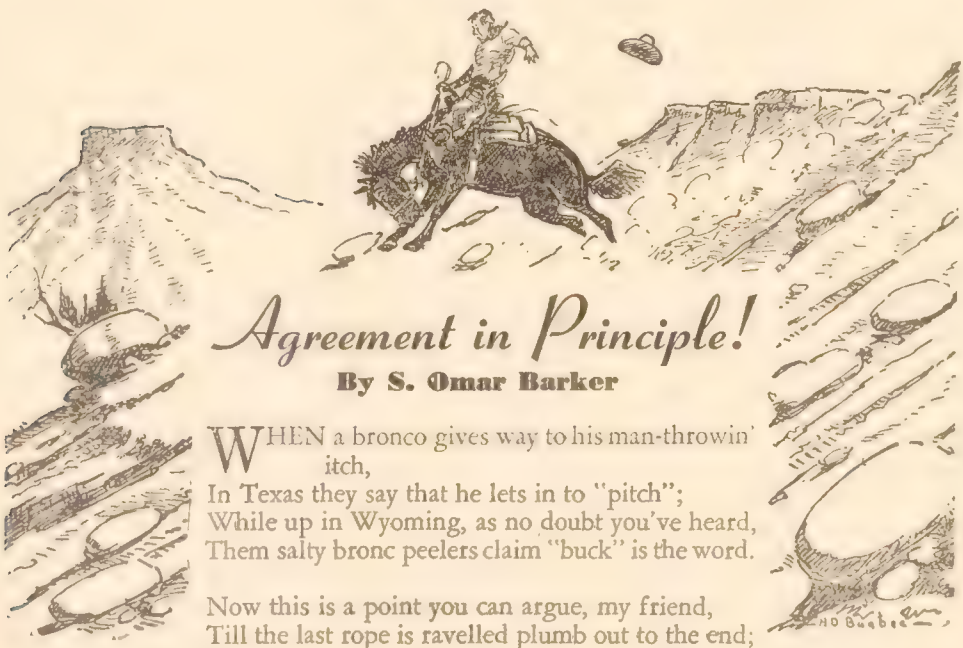
"Yes," one of them said.

"It's taken all of us to make the first steamboat trip down this river," Jerry said, "they'll get the grub at the price I pay for it—five cents on the dollar."

Whole-Hog Madden hesitated a long time. He was like a man dying hard. Financial defeat hurt him more than any physical beating he ever had. Jerry checked the supplies and paid, then he watched them saddle the mules and start upstream.

"Well," Sheridan said, "there they go, Hadden, Chalky, Grogan and Zindorf and the others, damned well licked. What do we do next?"

"I guess the boys are going to start mining," Jerry answered, "but for awhile, you and I, with a few pointers picked up from McCoy are going to run a steamboat business. But right now, I'm going to write a letter to my father and tell him he can stop worrying about two things, this steamboat line and his son, neither will cost him any more money. The first man going to the Coast can mail it. As soon as the letter is finished, I'm going to take a good, long sleep."



Agreement in Principle!

By S. Omar Barker

WHEN a bronco gives way to his man-throwin' itch,
In Texas they say that he lets in to "pitch";
While up in Wyoming, as no doubt you've heard,
Them salty bronc peelers claim "buck" is the word.

Now this is a point you can argue, my friend,
Till the last rope is ravelled plumb out to the end;
But all hands agree that when broncos explode,
It ain't what you call it that gits a man throwed!

Shows How Legends Are Born on the Logging Rivers!

McBRIDE'S LONG RIDE

By CLAY PERRY

HE WAS so clumsy, this big Johnny McBride, that he could not be trusted to swing an axe or pull on a cross-cut saw for fear he would whack some other lumberjack's head off or yank one into the crack in a tree. Bill Hailey, the boss, shook his grizzled head over this raw recruit who had been shipped up to the spruce, hemlock and pine job on the Swango River, along with a motley crew of rivermen, to help sweep down the drive, twenty miles to Swango Falls.

"He jest don't know his own stren'th or where to put it," growled the veteran woods foreman. "But I know where I'll put him. In the grubshanty gang to tote lunches to the drive crews. He'll be awful keerful of food, he gobbles so much of it. C'm 'ere, Paul Bunyan!"

He roared at McBride, who was leaning against a corner of the bunkshanty, picking his teeth with a sliver after eating like two men at sunrise breakfast.

Three hours later Johnny was trudging sullenly down the river trail with an enormous canvas knapsack on his back, weighted down with a mid-morning lunch for a dozen men who would be as hungry as wolves when it reached them. They ate five meals

a day in Hailey's crews, for he had learned in years of logging that men would work from dawn to dark without complaining—much—if they had plenty of good grub inside of them.

Packed neatly in that smoke-stained knapsack were sandwiches with thick slabs of roast pork bathed in mustard in them; dozens of doughnuts, pickles, ginger-snaps, and two gallon canisters of strong coffee, swathed in flannel to keep it hot. These comforting receptacles pressed warmly against McBride's mackinawed back as he stumbled along in his calked shoes, tripping on roots, getting his calks stuck in bits of bark and chips, bumping against a low branch or a leaning sapling, now and then, but making headway despite his clumsiness.

He had been admonished to make time, so as to catch the west side drive crew at Rocky Bend before 10 o clock, but he didn't need this admonishment, because he would not eat again until he got there and there were a half-dozen extra sandwiches earmarked for his own in the sack, and a plethora of sinkers and cookies. He carried a short-handled pike-pole in one hand. He had picked it up at the smithy to be used as an aid to locomotion on this hike of six miles down the dark stream.

"Paul Bunyan, eh, he calls me!" he muttered to himself through his red whiskers. "Makin' fun—but I bet I c'ud show old Paul Bunyan a trick or two, meself."

He jabbed the sharp-tipped pike at a log that was lodged in a small backwater under the cut bank. He missed, with his first jab, and almost tumbled headlong into the ice cold water, but grabbed at a bent birch which clung to the earth above the pool and saved himself and the grub pile.

His next stab at the hemlock went true and he shoved it out into the current. It swerved and turned end for end, bobbed up and down, rolled this way and that—but not clear over.

"By golly, I think I'll take me a ride on that piece of timber," Johnny decided. "She don't birl over. Got a big hump on one side."

He managed to retrieve the huge hemlock, a log a dozen feet long and almost three feet through, and by a miracle of awkward concentration and sheer luck, got aboard, with his pike-pole to help him keep balance, his calks to cling to the tough bark, and with his knees bent and himself ready to sit down a-straddle if the log rolled too much. He was no expert at riding a log but he fancied himself to be a natural birler, and this was an easy way to make five or six miles down the swift stream. He would get there in due time, perhaps a bit early and dig into that grubsack for himself.

IT WAS early spring and the snow-water still whitened the black water with fluffs of foam, here and there. Logs were dribbling down from the tail of the drive and soon Johnny had a chance to thrust his pike-point into another large and lazy hemlock so that he had better balance and safety. He began chanting a woods ballad in a voice that was terribly off-key but powerful and hearty. It was one of those sad sack songs about a river-hog being drowned when he went out to break up a jam on a rock.

He had just got to the 'steenth verse where the hero was being buried under rolling logs and smothered in deep water when a sudden gust of wet wind came whirling up-river and snatched his cut-brimmed hat almost off. In a wild swing of one arm to recover the hat Johnny came near going in, himself. It cut short his grand opera performance, and he had to concentrate on keeping the two legs close together and himself on top of one. The wind got stronger. With it came a drizzle of cold rain which increased rapidly in volume.

In a few minutes his mackinaw was soggy and dripping, water was trickling down between his shoulder-blades as the rain struck the stiff top of the knapsack and was deflected into Johnny's collar. His narrow-brimmed hat leaked and let cold water into his long, red hair. His bristling beard was like a mop, his hands numb, and his eyes bleared by the driving rain that began to have biting qualities as the cold air turned raindrops into wet snowflakes.

Johnny strained his smarting eyes for a chance to get ashore and take shelter. There didn't seem to be much promise of shelter. The woods had all been "bushed" along the steep shores, every last tree of pulp-wood size cut down and rolled in, leaving a barren stretch of sticky, slippery slopes with only stumps and brush left; here and there a pile of branches which might give shelter to a

rabbit but no comfortably spreading evergreens under which a man might crawl.

However, Johnny made for shore, and after much effort, using his pike alternately as a paddle and a shoving pole, maneuvered his two-log raft into a cove and scrambled off, getting wet only to the knees in the river. The grubsack was now seemingly twice as heavy as when he started from camp, rain-soaked, the shoulder-straps cutting into McBride's neck muscles as they shrunk and tightened. He staggered along through the stumps and brush, slipping in the wet clay, until he saw, at some distance up a slickly cleared hill, a huge hollow log that seemed to be looking at him with its one wide-open black eye.

"She's a long-butt, by golly," he told himself, proud of his lately acquired lumberjack language. "She's a big ol' cork pine long-butt that the timber crew left."

They had been cutting both for lumber and pulp here.

A LONG-BUTT, in the lexicon of the logging woods is the butt of a tree that is hollow from rottenness of the core. Such a length is sawed off at a little distance above where the hollow ends, and left where it lies, as not fit to send down with the drive. This one was perched on the hillside with its open end downhill, but propped up sufficiently so that it was not too steeply slanted to prevent a man crawling in—and the hole was big enough for even Johnny McBride's two hundred and fifteen pounds of manhood. He had to take his knapsack off, however, and at first considered leaving it outside. That precious grub must not be subjected to further soaking, however, so he shoved the soggy bundle in ahead of him and wiggled himself into the dry interior.

Just before Johnny immured himself in this fortunate shelter he heard a wild yell from downstream.

"Give 'er snoos, boys! Heave-o; heave-o!"

It was the rusty voice of the crew boss, down at Rocky Bend. He was urging the river-rats to break up a jam. A jam was always forming at Rocky Bend, which was why a big crew had been stationed there as the drive dribbled on down. Johnny was glad to hear the shouting. It meant he had come almost six miles on his errand and he judged it was not yet more than nine o'clock. He could lie comfortably in his hollow log and get warm and partly dry before he had to crawl out into the sleeting storm again and tote the grub on down.

He found himself, at first, in almost complete darkness, as his big body took up most of the room in his cylindrical hut, but as his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom, he saw a ray of light coming through a round hole in the top of the log-butt.

"She's even got a leetle winder in her," he chuckled; then he sighed and laid his head against the grubsack, pressed his wet cheek against the warmth of a canister of coffee, and fell sound asleep.

As he slumbered Johnny had a dream; it was one that was mixed up with a tall tale which Boss Hailey had told about Paul Bunyan. It came to life in Johnny's subconsciousness.

"They's a lot of people lay claim to knowin' where Paul Bunyan was borned," the tale began. "Some say it was in Maine, some claim it was in Michigan; others swear it was in Minnesota, but the truth is—an' this is a true story begod—he was borned up in Canady, on the Miramichi, where the first big loggin' jobs in Americay begun. He was borned of a Irish mother an' a Canuck father, both of 'em giants themselves. He was an Irish-Canuck, which is a combination nobody can beat for a loggin' man."

"In them days they used to use a *wanigan* to fetch up supplies to the woods camps and for a floatin' grub-shack as well, on the drive. It was a tough battle to git that raft with its long shanty up the stream. They had to pole 'er along with long, stout tamarack poles but sometimes they would come to some rapids they couldn't push 'er through, so they had a wench on'er—no, I don't mean a woman, I mean a wench with a cable onto it, fastened to the front deck, like a capstan onto a ship. They would anchor the *wanigan* and carry the end of the cable up to hitch it to a stump or a tree and up anchor and wind up the wench and pull the *wanigan* ahead. Even that was tough work, so they had a pawl on the wench that could be kicked into the ratchet wheel and the pawl would hold the *wanigan* fast. The jacks got to usin' the pawl when they got tired and to talkin' about it. They'd say:

" 'Kick in the pawl; he'll hold 'er. The pawl will hold anything.'

"Now, when the Canucks begun to come down into the States to go loggin', in Maine and New Hampshire and Vermont, they begun to hear this talk from the Yankees and they'd grin and say:

" 'Sure, Paul, he hol' onto anythin', for sure. Dat's our Paul Bun-*yan,* from de Miramichi. W'y, dat Paul Bun-*yan,* he one tam t'row a beeg rope aroun' a ten million feet log drive an' he hol' it back for a week w'ile dey wait for headwater.'

"This is a true story, I say! Hum! Paul Bunyan, he was the strongest man that ever lived—but he's dead now. They say, though, that sometime he'll come back, and that *he'll be borned over out of a big hollow tree."*

Something caused Johnny McBride in his long-butt hut to come half awake, out of this dream. It was a vague, uncomfortable feeling, as if the earth was moving under him. There had been a constant, muffled drumming sound on the long-butt, as the sleet changed to hail, a typical spring kick-back to winter in the Swango country in April. But now there was also a slow, grinding sound and some curious movement. Johnny opened his eyes and looked down along his six-foot three inches of manhood and saw the river rushing uphill. That was what it looked like, in the short glimpse that he got of the outside world, a river rising like a geyser and carrying a lot of logs up with it.

JOHNNY'S hair seemed to stand on end and lift his hat off. He wasn't quite sure whether he was awake and seeing things in actuality, or still asleep and having a nightmare—or a daymare. He struggled to slide out of the long-butt—and that instant something slammed into the open end of it, and struck against the soles of his shoes so hard that the calks stuck into it and his feet stung as if they were burning.

This served to bring McBride wide awake—but in almost total darkness again. He reached up a long arm and stuck a finger up through the knothole in the top of the log. His finger went through into the air, it went through a half-frozen layer of snow and hail, and let in a little more light, but not enough for Johnny to see what had whacked into the open end of the long-butt and *bastinadoed* him.

But he could feel—and *he could feel himself moving downward.* It seemed as if he was plunging downhill at sixty miles an hour. Well, he was moving pretty fast. What had happened makes a story that is told in the bunkhouses and camps all over the Great Lakes logging country and down in the wilds of West (begod) Virginia.

Rain and sleet and hail had undermined that long-butt as Johnny lay in it asleep. It had greased the greasy clay hillside as thoroughly as lumberjacks grease the skids on a rollway or bullchain trough. Johnny was taking a fast ride—and as the long-butt slid like chain lightning down that hillside, it struck a "joker" with its open end.

A joker is a wedge-shaped piece of timber that has been cut out of a log to remove an imperfection in the timber. In this case the wedge was almost perfectly round and just the size to make a fine cork to plug up the open end of that white pine long-butt. That is how Johnny McBride got corked in, with his calks, which lumberjacks call "corks," sticking into the cork joker—and no joke was that whatever. Not to Johnny McBride.

FOUR days later the mill crew at the sawmill where the timber logs and the pulp logs were separated as they came in together with the drive on the Swango River, rolled a huge white pine log onto the carriage which shuttled back and forth and shoved logs against the whirling steel teeth of the great circular saw.

"By the holy old Mackinaw, this here's a awful heavy piece of timber for cork pine!" shouted one of the sawyer's two assistants, as they rolled the great log onto the carriage—and missed seeing the knothole. "She rolls almost like she was alive, but she's hefty, somehow. Must be water-soaked."

"Whad'ye say?" screeched the head sawyer, scowling along the bumpy surface of the pine.

He couldn't hear much except the words . . . *"alive . . . hefty . . ."* and he was always to remember those two words.

He pulled a lever and the dogs bit into the bark of the log, and he pulled another and the carriage moved forward, slowly, carefully aiming the butt of the log at the singing cylinder of the great saw. Those steel teeth bit into the wood like a knife into cheese and a thick slab began to be re-

moved from the roundness, leaving a square cut side of nice white timber. It wasn't much water-soaked, after all.

The long bark-covered slab came off and onto the rollers and fell off into the pit where waste was being dumped. The sawyer brought the log carriage back, with a rider whose duty it was to work the "nigger," a powerful, sharp-pointed arm of steel that was jabbed into the log and turned it, almost like a giant human hand.

Another jerk of a lever and the carriage moved forward again.

"Makes a funny sound, that there big cork pine," mumbled the sawyer, his ears tuned to any variation in the song of his saw. Off came another long slab, and still the knothole was not noticed, for it was on the underside of the log.

There was a big bulge where the knothole was and one of the crew made the remark that "she must of been a easy rider; she wouldn't roll over at all, just as if she had a keel like a boat."

"Zoooom-whee-zeep!" sang the saw as it tore a third slab from the log, and back came the carriage as if hung on hinges that swung like a great horizontal gate.

Over again, a quarter way over, the nigger pulled it—and the carriage started to move for the fourth cut.

The sawyer knitted his already furrowed brow and shook his head as he caught the strangely hollow sound of his saw carving off another slab, screeching through the bulge which, of course, was a knot with its middle fallen out, where once a big branch had grown.

As the long strip came off and clattered onto the rollers and went smacking down into the waste pit, and the now squared timber was turned a quarter way over, the knothole was clearly revealed, on top.

And out of that knothole came a thing that looked like a great big grubworm with a horny head on it—and then it looked different, as it was moved, frantically, with a somewhat desperate waving motion.

The sawyer saw it and turned pale. He was not very superstitious but this was something that in all his thirty years of experience with timber he had never seen before. He reached automatically for a lever and stopped the carriage dead.

"Pull that timber off!" he yelped.

His assistants jumped, with their canthooks, clamped them, one near each end of the squared hunk of white wood and jerked it toward them.

Both of them nearly fell over backward when that four-foot-thick-squared log came suddenly apart, from end to end, and something that looked like a pop-eyed Santa Claus in lumberjack garb was seen to be lying in one hollow half of the split timber.

It sat up, but it didn't move to get out. With a trembling hand and his own eyes bulging, the boss sawyer shut off the saw.

The Santa Claus even had a pack with him, open and shrunken down of its contents, and a canister with its screw top off between his knees but these familiar objects were not what caused the boss sawyer and his helpers to cry out.

It was because the human being—if it was one—which sat in the half-hollow of the great log which had been about to be carved up into planks, *had white whiskers and pure white hair.*

He sat there as if paralyzed, unable to move his feet. It was because his steel calks were still stuck in the joker and the joker was still stuck in the half log, because the wood had swelled during its four days in the river and tightened the cork.

The boss sawyer, being closest to this apparition, began to clear his wobbling vision. The face beneath that shock of snow-white hair was young and recognizable.

"Why—why, be Jasper, it's the mighty McBride!" he croaked. "How in the name of God did ye git to be in thar, McBride?"

The answer came in a tremulous voice from the young face with the white beard:

"I'm Paul Bunyan, borned out of a holler tree, like he said."

"Begod, I think ye're Rip Van Winkle woken up arter twenty years of sleep," mumbled the sawyer.

But McBride really believed that it was true he was Paul Bunyan born again and he never got over it. Everyone humored him because they thought he had a right to think so after his long ride in a long-butt in the drive and his miraculous escape from being sliced to ribbons by a big circular saw. Besides, it gave Swango Falls a name for itself as "The Home of Paul Bunyan, Reborn."

Curioddities By Weill

THE MONITOR LIZARD OF AUSTRALIA IS THE **LARGEST** LIZARD IN THE WORLD! BLOWS FROM HIS LASHING TAIL HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO ***KILL HALF-GROWN KANGAROOS!***

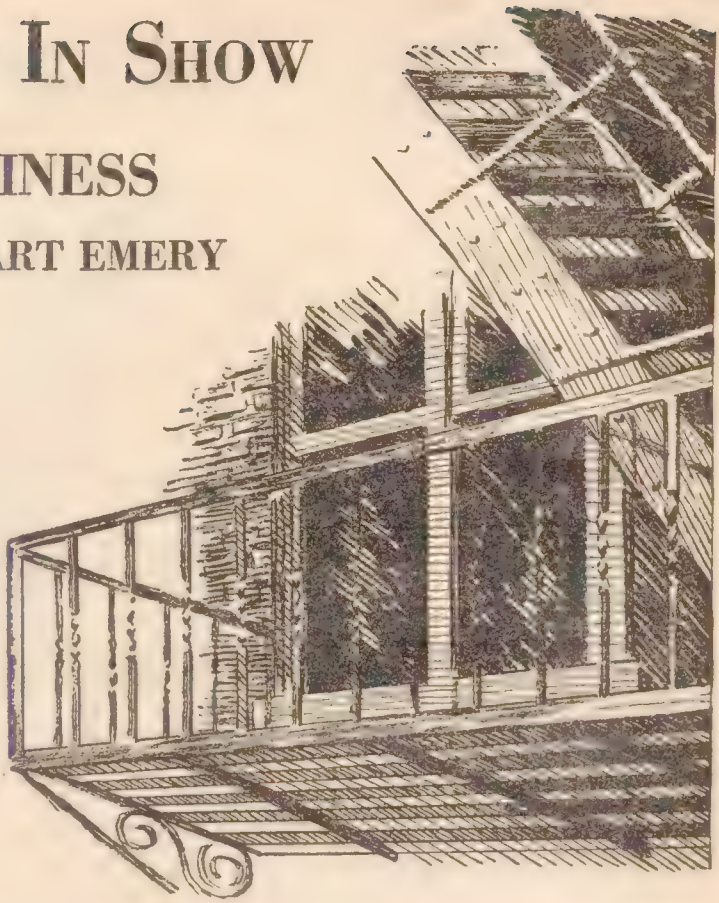
THE MOST FORMIDABLE OF ALL INSECTS IS THE **SAGA**, A HUGE CARNIVOROUS BUSH CRICKET! ITS JAWS ARE POWERFUL ENOUGH TO TAKE *A GOOD-SIZED BITE OUT OF* ***A MAN'S FINGER!***

WHILE HOLDING ITS QUARRY WITH MYRIAD SUCTORIAL TUBE-FEET, THE STARFISH *PRO-TUDES ITS STOMACH TO ENVELOP ITS PREY!* DIGESTION IS GRADUALLY PERFORMED BY STOMACH JUICES REDUCING THE FLESH TO FLUID, *WHICH IS THEN ABSORBED THROUGH THE WALLS OF THE* ***EVERTED STOMACH!***

Murder In Show Business

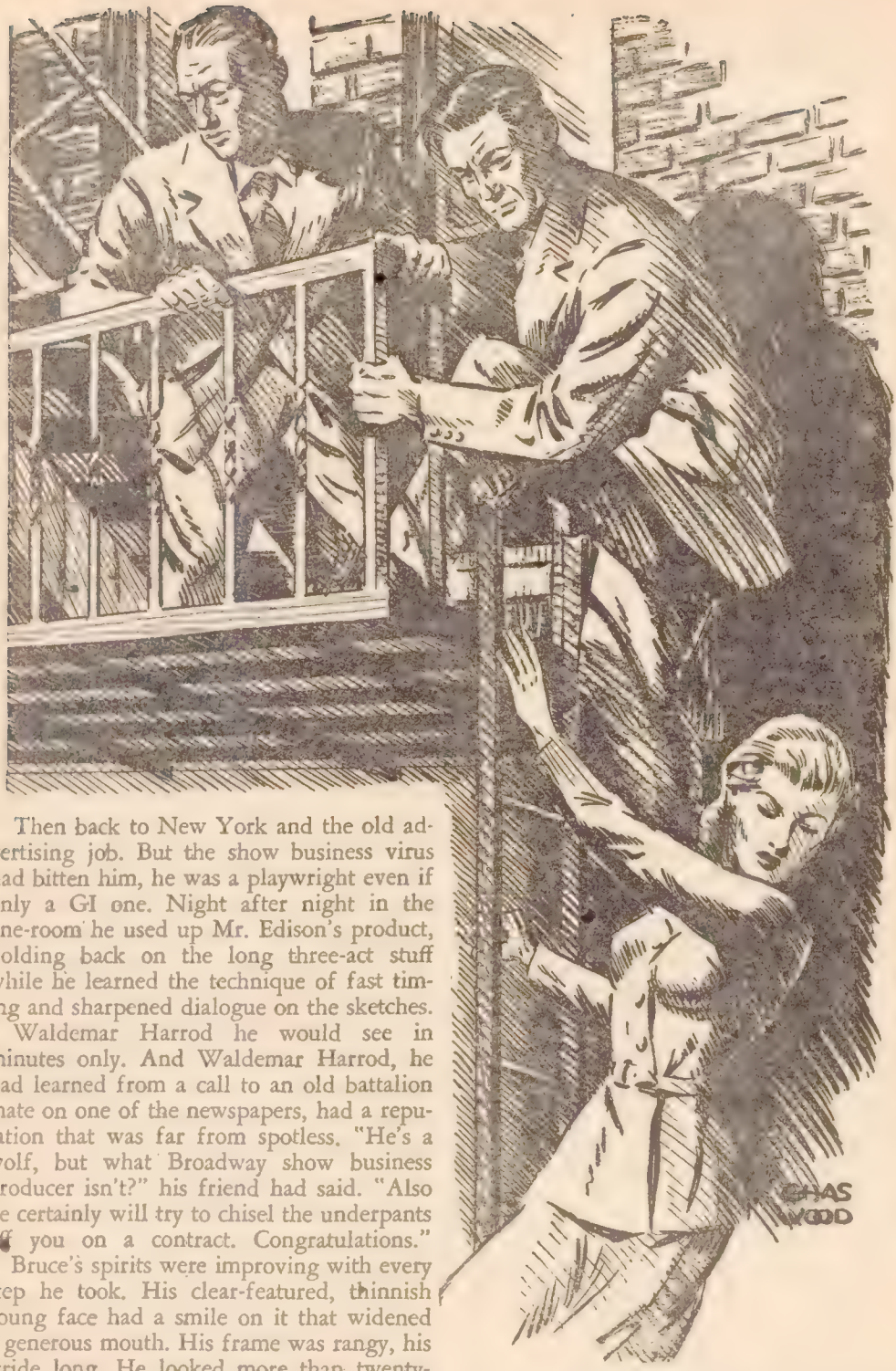
By STEUART EMERY

A Producer's Office on Broadway—First a Beehive of Jobhunters, Then Suddenly a Kennel of Bloodhounds



GOING into show business! The thought was elating, the flashing electric signs, the animation and bustle of the crowd around him stimulated, all the hectic excitement of the Main Stem was contagious as Gordon Bruce came out of the subway at Times Square and headed up Broadway for his appointment with its latest and most successful producer. No, they didn't put playwright's names in theatre signs but the name of a play of his might be there sooner than he had hoped. He touched his coat and felt inside it the letter with the engraved heading, "Waldemar Harrod Enterprises," that had reached him when he got back to his one-room apartment in the East Twenties after the advertising office closed. He knew its brief message by heart. "Come and see me about your sketches between nine and eleven Wednesday night. Waldemar Harrod."

Three fifteen-minute sketches and two blackouts submitted a month ago when *Variety*, the Bible of show-business, had carried the news that Waldemar Harrod, author and producer of the fabulous musical comedy smash "Heart of Texas," was in the market for material for a new revue. Bruce strode a little faster through the chattering, jostling throng. He remembered the first sketch he had written back in rest billets while his shattered division had been brought up to strength with replacements and re-armed on its months-long drive from Normandy's beaches across the Rhine. It had been produced there in the rear divisional area and the GIs, worn, battle-weary and half numb from exhaustion, had howled their helmets off at it. The second sketch written in hospital where they took the lead out of his left shoulder. That too had seen GI production and more wild yells and laughter.



Then back to New York and the old advertising job. But the show business virus had bitten him, he was a playwright even if only a GI one. Night after night in the one-room he used up Mr. Edison's product, holding back on the long three-act stuff while he learned the technique of fast timing and sharpened dialogue on the sketches.

Waldemar Harrod he would see in minutes only. And Waldemar Harrod, he had learned from a call to an old battalion mate on one of the newspapers, had a reputation that was far from spotless. "He's a wolf, but what Broadway show business producer isn't?" his friend had said. "Also he certainly will try to chisel the underpants off you on a contract. Congratulations."

Bruce's spirits were improving with every step he took. His clear-featured, thinnish young face had a smile on it that widened a generous mouth. His frame was rangy, his stride long. He looked more than twenty-eight but so did everybody who went into a combat division at twenty-four and came out four years and five drives later. There was fire and the flame of lights on Broadway

and plenty of casualties; there were ruined bodies and disrupted minds here too under the veneer of Manhattan. He swung on, a single block more and he'd be there. This was his big night, he knew somehow, he felt strangely high.

SOMETHING else in front of him was strangely high. Bruce dodged aside as the queer figure on the immensely tall stilts clumped onto him. Up there on the walker's breast hung the big sign, red-lettered on white, "Eat at Beefsteak Joe's." The man was chanting, "Eat at Beefsteak Joe's," as he marched along amid occasional laughs and louder catcalls. It was old stuff but it was always good on Broadway and it had been ever since the first stilt walker had plugged for Minsky's burleycue. He swerved abruptly and went into the sidestreet. Waldemar Harrod's office here in the Roaring Forties would be about midblock of a street that varied in its character from office buildings to brownstones, with everything from Italian spaghetti dinners to Chinese laundries in its basements, and more or less painless dentists and milliners on its first floors. The Main Stem was mixed, but it was magnificent.

And then he blinked. There were the usual passersby in this West Side Street but there was a passerby he had seen just this minute ago on Broadway. Or was he crazy? Halfway down the block moved a stilt-walker bearing the sandwich board "Eat at Beefsteak Joe's."

No, he wasn't seeing double, he told himself. Beefsteak Joe simply had two men, maybe half a dozen stilt-walking for him and this one was prowling the sidestreets instead of the Main Stem. He didn't even throw another look at the oncoming figure. Here he was at the door of Waldemar Harrod's office building, a three-story remodelled structure with other remodelled office buildings flanking it.

He shoved open the door, suddenly nervous. The elation seemed to have left him. He was tense and strained as though a whistle were going to blow and he was going into combat again. He fought it down with a hard effort. This was Broadway, not Remagen Bridge. But the subconscious pumping up of every reserve, mental and physical, seemed to average up at about the same. The big night of his life so far. Win or lose on tonight's outcome.

Playwright going into New York production or just another one-room flop. He went on up the stairs, one flight, faced the door with "Waldemar Harrod Enterprises" in gold letters on it, opened it and stepped inside.

He knew what he expected to find, the typical crowded waiting room of a topflight Broadway entrepreneur, jammed with a heterogeneous array of talent, near-talent and hopeful aspirants, practically incarnadined with lipstick and redolent of every perfume allure and cigarette aroma known to the advertising pages. For a moment he was surprised and stood still, the door handle still in his grip.

There was absolutely no one in the waiting room except a blond girl in a green suit sitting in a chair by the inner wall and a young man sitting behind a desk that obviously served as reception barrier. It was placed squarely before a door leading into an inner office with the portentous word "Private" on its frosted glass.

"Nothing at all, beloved. No one except by appointment, sweetheart. Exit laughingly," came from the desk.

"Huh?" inquired Bruce.

He surveyed the young man sitting behind the desk, giving him a close study. He was about the smartest and toughest young man of somewhere under thirty and the most competent-looking Bruce had seen in a long, long time. He was Broadway, the Main Stem, all over, cheerful and completely disillusioned. On the back of his head a straw hat clung, his bright blue eyes glinted pleasedly, his large mouth grinned and his batlike ears stuck out from the sides of his head. He was barbered to perfection, his doubled-breasted coat was open, disclosing the waistline of trousers that came up to his breastbone where they became overlaid by a howling hand-painted tie. Here was a poise and assurance that was practically appalling.

"You heard me, light of my life. Mister Big Boy Waldemar Harrod sees no one except by appointment this witching night, hence the lack of bodies about the joint. His production manager has been with him a coupla hours now. Close the door softly as you go."

Bruce grinned in his turn and advanced. "Listen—" he said.

"I am not a good listener," remarked the young man. "No, no and again no, beloved."

"Here's an appointment," said Bruce and drew out his letter. "Mr. Harrod wants to see me tonight—Skits." He held out the typed sheet and the young man scanned it.

"You win, Shakespeare," he said. "Hughey Malloy takes back all his nasty words. But I am so used to saying 'No' around here to the hams for a pleasingly plump salary that I have commenced to like it. Sit down over there with the young lady, who has an appointment too until Mister Big finishes up. Miss—ah, er. . ." He raised his voice cheerfully. "Miss Alicia Carlson, this is Mr. Gordon Bruce, also seeking his fortune in show business." He leaned back in his swivel chair and put both feet on the desk. "What a life of toil and tribulation rounding the offices, my friends. There's a fallen arch for every light on Broadway."

He grinned cynically at Bruce and Bruce grinned back, then started for the empty chair beside the girl's. For the first time he had a clear look at her. And he saw something he wasn't going to forget in a hurry.

Her face was heart-shaped with the dark eyes set well apart, a heavy amber-blonde bob hung to her shapely shoulders. It looked a little too well-set as though she had just stepped from a beauty parlor, and Bruce had never been partial to blondes. But this girl was startlingly attractive and startling in another way. She was pale, deadly pale. The lipstick and makeup flared against the background of smoothly-textured skin. Her eyes seemed to be violently dilated as though under the strain of some terrific tension. He could see the tautness of her fingers gripping the handbag in her lap. He settled easily into the chair next to her and drew out a crumpled package of cigarettes.

"Smoke, Miss Carlson?"

"Thanks."

She reached for the cigarette and got it to her lips with a hand that trembled. Bruce snicked on his lighter for her. There was a tiny slithering sound and a thud. On the floor lay the handbag that had slipped from her lap, miscellaneous contents spilling from it. He leaned down and at the same moment so did she. Their heads bumped, hard.

"Oh!" she said and jerked back.

"Sorry," got out Bruce. "My fault. Here, I'll get the stuff."

He thrust a lipstick and compact into the bag, took up the last bit of flotsam, a small gold pencil and put it in too. In the final second before he closed the bag he glanced down into it and felt the jolt of shock run through him. In the bottom nested a small, deadly .32 automatic. "Ah—er—" he managed, clicked the bag shut and passed it to her, just as the door to the inner office swung open. A florid-faced man stood there, briefcase under arm.

"I'll have that all cleared up tomorrow," he called back over his shoulder, heading for the door. "G'night, Mr. Harrod. G'night, Hughey," he said as he passed the desk.

"Nighty-night, Mr. Buchman," returned Hughey. The florid man went out the front door. "That's the production manager going home with a briefcase full of ulcers. You're on next, Miss Carlson, as soon as—Hey you!"

THROUGH the door left open by the outgoing production manager shuffled a strange figure. The man was tall, with wide shoulders, a shortish body and unusually long legs. His shabby clothes hung on a frame that must once have been powerful and he moved swiftly with the remnants of some lost rhythm and grace. In his chalky, seamed face big gray eyes popped, they swept the room and came to rest on Hughey.

"Outa here, no one except by appointment, Daddy Long Legs."

"Paul Miller," husked the man in a voice that sounded as if it had long been disused. "I'm Paul Miller. I've got a knockout act for Mister Harrod, I've got—"

"Outa here, Daddy Long Legs," reiterated Hughey. "He's seeing nobody but these two. Buy yourself a stamp and send your application in through the regular channels."

"But my act, my act!" Long Legs' mouth twitched, his whole face twitched.

"The most beautiful acts in America pass through these portals," said Hughey. "But not tonight. You git!"

"I—I, I'll be back," groaned the man and turned.

The sound of a buzzer cut in on his exit. Hughey swung easily up from his spine. "That's Mister Big." He turned the handle

of the private office door, there rose a heavy voice and he was back.

"You can go in, Miss Carlson. He's ready for you."

"Thanks," said the girl.

Swiftly she rose and went for the office door. She walked straight and fast as though a driving purpose rode her, the bag with the .32 in it under her arm. The door closed behind her. What kind of a girl was this, reflected Bruce, who kept an appointment with a Broadway producer carrying an automatic? Was Waldemar Harrod's reputation as bad as all that?

He leaned back in his chair. The Daddy Long Legs incident in front of him was over and he realized that he hadn't been paying much attention to it. It was a routine occurrence, apparently, in Waldemar Harrod's outer office, probably enacted a dozen times a day by the cynical Hughey and some applicant for an interview. His mind, he realized, had been on the girl now hidden from his sight by the thin partition that divided the private office from the waiting room. It was a very thin partition, he could hear her voice, as the minutes went by, low and muffled, and suddenly overlaid by a man's harsher accents. The girl's voice rose and carried to him through the wooden curtain.

"You hound, you ought to be shot!"

There was an instant of sudden, tense silence, then the sound of a slap. Then the patter of swift, hurrying footsteps, the door to the private office flew open and the girl stood there, rigid, taut of face. She slammed the door behind her and went for the entrance of the waiting room, jerked the door open, slammed it also behind her and disappeared. She had not spent more than seconds between the private office and the exit, but in those seconds Bruce had had burned in upon his mind the picture of a face, gone colorless, in which the eyes blazed and the mouth was desperately set. Emotion, terrible and overpowering, had swept this girl.

"What in hell?" remarked Hughey. "Something tells me, beloved, that she didn't like whatever Mister Big said to her. And she isn't the first. Well—" he shrugged and got up from his seat—"call for the great playwright. You're on next, Shakespeare."

He moved to the private office door, threw a sagacious wink over his shoulder, turned the handle and went in, closing the door smartly behind him. Bruce reached for another cigarette, fumbled it out of the package and got it alight. Whatever might have happened in Waldemar Harrod's office, he figured it would take a few minutes for it to be composed. He had heard what sounded exactly like a violent slap delivered against a man's face. He straightened in his chair. Through the door plunged Hughey, his big mouth slack.

"He's stiff!"

"Who's what?" demanded Bruce.

"Waldemar! He's dead!"

"Good God!" Bruce jumped to his feet. Without realizing it he was through the door and staring at the scene in the private office. A big-bodied, fleshy man with a bald, mottled skull filled the chair behind the desk, his gross jaw slack and his pouched eyes fixed in a glassy stare. Uninhibited desires and dissipation had laid their mark on the swollen, clean-shaved features but now another mark, that of sudden destruction had been laid on them. From a little to the side Bruce could make out the small dark hole driven into the side of the head. Tiny drops seeped from it. Bruce had seen plenty of bullet holes before. Waldemar Harrod had not been a pleasant looking person in life, he was even more unpleasant-looking in death.

Bruce spun around and faced Hughey who had come racing back into the private office. The young man's look of wild amazement had disappeared, his tough veneer of Broadway was slipping back.

"I always said a dame would get him. So did a few thousands of other guys on Broadway. And so she got him. That little trick, Alicia Carlson, who looked like a nice little girl who knew how to cook."

"No, she didn't," blurted Bruce. "She couldn't have."

Hughey's eyebrows elevated. "Then how do you explain the body in the chair, sweetheart? Optical illusion done by mirrors at the old Palace Theatre? You and me and she—that's all the human beings was in this office. Wanta match and odd coin takes the blame? Damned if I want to call the coppers and put those bloodhounds on her trail."

"Murder!" It was a screech from behind Bruce. In the open office door stood Daddy

Long Legs, mouth a gaping hole and eyes starting from their sockets. "Waldemar Harrod murdered! Murder!"

"Shut up, you damned fool, or I'll bounce you from here to Harlem!" rasped Hughey. "Sneaked back, did you? Well, sneak right out again with a foot in your rear."

Long Legs leaped nimbly aside as Hughey ploughed for him and rushed to the window. His appalling cry carried up and down the street, keening over the passersby on the sidewalks below. "Murder! Help, police! Cops, cops! Waldemar Harrod is murdered! Get the girl in the green suit! Get her, get her!"

"Now you've torn it!" snarled Hughey.

"Cops, cops! Get the cops! A girl has killed Waldemar Harrod!" Long-legs was shrieking on. Startled faces turned up to him from the street, people began to stop and cars suddenly halted. "I saw her with the gun! Get the girl in the green suit!"

Hughey and Bruce jumped for him at the same time and pulled him away from the window. Hughey held his arms behind him and dragged him into the center of the carpet.

"Lay off that yowling. You never saw nothing."

"Yes, I did, I did! I was waiting outside in the hall, I never left this floor. I was kneeling down, looking through the letter slot in the office door to see how the appointments were making out. I meant to stop Waldemar Harrod on his way out. I saw the girl open the office door, white as a sheet, and shove a gun back into her handbag. She came out so fast I just had time to straighten up and jump alongside the front door when she sailed out and past me. She never saw me. She's gone, she's got away!"

Bruce stepped back to the window. Down on the street tumult had exploded, the wild alarm was ringing for blocks. "Waldemar Harrod's shot! Girl killed him! Hey, cops!"

Already a figure in blue was in sight on the Broadway side, another was coming fast from the avenue on the opposite side of the street. The net was out, it came to Bruce, in minutes only the girl would be a hopeless hunted fugitive with the charge of murder on her head. Every man's hand would be against her, by squads, by radio cars, by teletype they would hunt her down.

And then he saw her, just slipping between a pair of stalled cars and reaching the sidewalk across the street. She turned and looked back up at the window of the private office where Bruce stood. In the glare of the lights her face came clear. It was stricken, appalled, as the hue-and-cry rose.

"Girl shot Waldemar Harrod! Get her! She's got a gun!"

The girl stood stock-still as though frozen by shock, the patrolman coming from the avenue cut diagonally across the street almost in front of her, from a lunchroom two heavy-bodied men shouldered and drove through the crowd with professional efficiency. There were always scores of police, in uniform and out in the Times Square district, Bruce could see blue figures farther up the street, blocking it off as they advanced. And what was the girl going to do?

He saw her step swiftly for a couple of yards and bring up against the side of a refuse can on the curb. The handbag swung forward, she reached into it, drew something out that glinted and slid it down the side of her coat into the can. There went the gun, Bruce realized, and into about the worst place she could pick to hide it. The girl sent one last, frightened glance up at the window where he stood, turned, poised like a bird trying to dodge the onrush of a hawk, and as a blueclad figure bore down toward her she walked across the pavement and in through the door above which flashed the neon sign, "Charley's Cocktail Corner."

She wasn't a hundred feet from the body of Waldemar Harrod. It wouldn't be more than minutes before an army of plainclothesmen and uniformed police would be combing the entire vicinity for a girl answering her description. Already on the stairs leading to the office Bruce could hear the thud of official feet, the tumult on the street was mounting. Hughey still held Long Legs pinioned. He suddenly rushed him to a leather chair and slammed him into it.

"Now you," he ordered, "shut up! I'll do the talking from now on. Bruce—"

"I'll be back," rapped Bruce.

Impulse rode him, an overpowering impulse to get to the girl before the police did. He went fast through the outer office and reached the head of the stairs. He went plunging down them. Two police officers were pushing up fast.

"Second floor, officers. Front," panted Bruce. "I'm going for a doctor. Quick, quick!"

It worked and he was down and out the door that led into the street. He broke through the crowd already pressing in front of the building and slowed his pace. Traffic still was stopped, east to west, and he assumed a careless saunter across the street, bringing up against the refuse can in which the girl had dropped her gun. There it was, butt upward, slid down against the side.

He reached a handkerchief from his breast pocket, held it in his hand and put his hand down. The handkerchief came up with the small weapon hidden in it. No one was looking at him, every face on the street was turned toward the murder scene. He lifted the handkerchief with the gun in it to his face and sniffed through the silk at the end of the barrel. He caught the odor that he had caught so often on in combat, acrid, burnt. This gun had been fired.

II

THE door of Charley's Cocktail Corner was open and he walked through it. Every nerve in him was jangled. He was being torn apart between knowledge of evidence that was overwhelming and his mind's stubborn refusal to accept it. It was a typical Broadway bar and cocktail lounge that he entered. Right now it was denuded of customers with the exception of a somewhat glassy-eyed gentleman in a sports jacket and open-throated shirt who crouched on a stool at the bar which was practically propping him up. The girl was nowhere in sight, but at the end of the premises Bruce saw the entrance to the cocktail lounge in the rear. That would be where she had taken shelter.

He stopped at the mahogany. "Scotch and soda," he said, in an offhand tone to the white-jacketed bartender. The glassy-eyed one stared at him.

"Whash all shooting about? Everybody but me has hightailed out to peek."

"Waldemar Harrod was shot across the street," said Bruce. "At least that's what someone was shouting."

"And high time," gurgled glassy-eyes. "Plenty high time. Show bizness myself. Dirty Ole Waldemar. Pin medal on who shot dirty Ole Waldemar."

The scotch-and-soda came and Bruce's coins went into the till. He lifted the glass and nodded to the bartender. "Think I'll try inside." He strolled to the rear into an atmosphere of subdued lights and secretive booths, just another Main Stem rendezvous. It seemed utterly empty, either the hour was still too early for it to draw its trade or else the patrons in their turn had gone rushing into the street. Then he saw the girl, under the dimmish light, in the telephone booth that stood against the rear wall next to an open door that gave onto a back courtyard of some kind.

Even at that distance and in the murky light he could see that her face was taut and strained. She was talking fast into the instrument as though a great deal depended on the conversation. Bruce eased forward and sat down on the leather-covered seat of a booth, practically concealed by the stall's edge. When the girl finished and came out he was going to be waiting for her.

But someone else was waiting for her. The deeper shadow in the shadows alongside the booth moved. A man was there, a tall, gaunt man in dark clothes whose face was hardly more than a pale blur. He was standing pressed against the telephones' booth wall. He was listening, he was waiting, and he had his right hand in the waistband of his somber coat. His hat was drawn far down over his eyes and his head was bent a little on lean shoulders. Somehow his features and his physique were vaguely familiar. He had not seen Bruce and Bruce didn't mean him to. He slid back on his seat so that he could still see the girl but not the man. He was covered from view of the trailer. The trailer had something in his grip, so did Bruce. He slipped his hand into his own right pocket and felt the cold metal of the .32 automatic that he had picked out of the refuse can. Something might be coming up. It came.

The girl swept from the booth and straight for the door that led into the rear courtyard. She was through it in a flash. After her slithered the tall, dark shadow and in the shadow's hand glinted steel. Bruce was up and going fast as the courtyard swallowed fugitive and pursuer. This was no plain-clothesman picking up a trail, this was a killer with his blade in his hand.

Bruce's gun leaped into his own hand, he covered the short distance past the empty stalls to the door and plunged through it.

The fitful light of a high-riding moon silvered the grimy and rubbish-strewn rear premises. The court was wide and overshadowed by the buildings that edged it. Halfway across it Bruce made out the girl, hardly more than a flitting shape, heading for a high wooden wall. Behind her and picking up speed darted the gaunt figure. The figure's hand came up, arm back for the throw. At that range, unsuspected, there would be no miss. Bruce halted to give him poise, set to shoot as he had shot so many times before in the years of war when speed and accuracy meant the difference between life and death.

"Stop, you!" he crackled. "Drop that knife!"

The gaunt, tall man whirled and across the space Bruce glimpsed the staring eyes and pallid features. The knife went farther back for the throw but now it was coming for Bruce. A tiny whistle broke from the man's lips, his arm darted forward. Bruce pumped the first and second shots so fast they sounded like a single flat slap lost in the night-time tumult of Broadway that surged around this island of gloom. Toward him rushed the streak of steel, he felt it hit his hat and wrench it from his head. The gaunt man cursed, whirled and raced for the wooden wall not twenty yards away.

"Halt!" shouted Bruce and swerved his gun to shoot for the extra-long legs. Those legs left the ground in a gigantic leap at the wall, they took the man upward and he grasped the top of the boarding with both hands, gave a wrench and swung his entire body up and over. There was the thud of his landing on the other side of the wall and the retreating patter of his feet, racing into oblivion. It was the fastest, most expertly trained wall jump Bruce had ever seen. No commando in training course or active combat had ever done one quicker or better.

He bent down and picked up the hat that lay a couple of feet away. It was transfixed by the blade that had missed the center of his forehead by bare inches. Off to the side of the court in the shadows poised the girl, halted in her flight by the battle.

"Wait, please," called Bruce softly. "I'm the man you met in Harrod's office."

He drew the knife from the hat, thrust it into his waistband, tossed the wrecked hat into the rubbish, put the gun back in his pocket and went forward. This was no time for details or lengthy explanations. He meant to get the girl out and into a spot of safety. He reached her and stopped. "Remember me?"

"Yes, I remember you. What has happened?"

"I followed you across the street into that cocktail lounge. Keep on moving, we'll talk as we go. There was a man next the phone booth trailing you, he was going to knife you when I fired with the gun you dropped in the ashcan."

"Knife me! Why?" Shock tightened the girl's face.

"Don't ask me. Waldemar Harrod has been shot. You heard that fool Daddy Long-legs shrieking all over the street to get the girl in the green suit."

"Yes, I heard him. And I didn't do it."

THEY had reached the wall and its door, stepping into the alley that ran through the buildings onto the next street. Not far along it a dim doorway showed with a lighted globe above it, but the figure of the gaunt man had long since vanished as Bruce knew it would.

"The police want you just the same. Daddy Long-legs, no doubt, at this moment is eagerly spilling the description of Alicia Carlson, amber-blonde shoulder bob, green suit, green hat, five feet two, weight about 120." He looked deep into the eyes that turned to him, dark and enlarged with strain. "I don't believe you did it, Miss Carlson. But the evidence is tremendous. It will be overwhelming if you had the motive for it."

Into his mind sprang a recollection that hammered ominously. A fierce young voice, "You hound, you ought to be shot!" The sound of a slap that could have been the flattish report of a small gun.

"I had the motive," said the girl in a queer, strained voice. "I am glad to hear Waldemar Harrod is dead. There is no Waldemar Harrod any more, there never was a real Waldemar Harrod. And in minutes only there will be no more Alicia Carlson. She never existed either. Here we are, here is where I was going."

She stopped. Bruce faced an open stage door, giving onto a dreary corridor with steps at its end.

"Come in."

Bruce stepped through the stage door into the corridor. There was a cubbyhole directly beside it in which sat an elderly, stoop-shouldered man drawing on an empty pipe with a pink tabloid newspaper on his lap.

"Closin' up, Miss Alicia," he said.

"We'll go out by the front, Pop. Lock away. I'd hoped Miss Post would still be staying on when I phoned a few minutes ago. I wanted her to bring me something I left in the dressing room."

"She'd just gone, Miss Alicia."

"It'll be all right, Pop," said the girl.

She went swiftly forward and up the steps. Bruce found himself staring at the wings and then at the empty stage they were traversing and the vast, vacant theatre with the drably-clad figures of charwomen moving about among its seats. They were wearing shapeless wrappers and had their heads done up in dustcloths. This was the reality of the theatre after the curtain had come down and the footlighted land of make-believe had vanished. All was dust and dinginess and murk.

When the lights were on drama and comedy walked the boards Bruce was crossing. It came to him with a sense of shock that while the theatre's make-believe drama was dead he himself and this girl beside him were engaged in a bitter and stark drama out of real life. She was wanted for murder in the drama and there was no playwright to put on the happy ending. Unless it was himself and he was facing a blank wall.

"This way," said the girl. They had passed over the stage, gone by the mass of pulleys and apparatus in the opposite wings and come onto the passage of dressing rooms. "In here."

The naked electric light still glowed overhead in the small room. A makeup table with its three-sided mirror stood against the wall, costumes hung on their hangers. The girl swung suddenly around, facing Bruce. "I told you there was no Alicia Carlson. Look!"

Her hand flashed to her head, her fingers worked and lifted and the blonde shoulder bob was gone. In its place was a close-cropped coiffure of shining auburn, the most attractive color Bruce had ever seen.

"Exit Alicia Carlson. Enter Carol Lane."

The personality of the girl seemed to undergo a change with the disappearance of the wig. The slightly artificial air was gone. She was vibrantly alive, a raving little red-headed beauty. But she was in trouble, still —bad trouble.

"I'm here on the stage in 'Crossroads,' playing a little blonde gold-digger. So right in my gold-digger's blonde getup that gentlemen prefer I went over to see Waldemar Harrod after I was through at the end of Act Two. And I went to see him as Alicia Carlson, not as Carol Lane. He would never see Carol Lane, who knew him when she was a child, and is the daughter of the man he robbed of a fortune."

"Robbed, Harrod robbed your father?"

"As cold a steal as Broadway ever saw. Do you know what I had in my handbag? The receipt from the Bureau of Copyrights, Washington, admitting 'North of the Rio Grande' to copyright years ago, made out to my father, Gardner Lane, as author You've heard of 'Heart of Texas?' "

" 'North of the Rio Grande' means nothing to me," said Bruce doubtfully. "But 'Heart of Texas'—well, I don't have to be in show business to know it's the biggest musical comedy smash Broadway has had in twenty years."

He knotted his forehead summoning stray bits of newspaper reading. A full year to capacity houses, road shows out, movie sale for $400,000 plus royalties, produced by Waldemar Harrod, book by Waldemar Harrod. It was a gold mine, a property worth millions. "What has 'Heart of Texas' to do with—"

"Plenty. 'Heart of Texas' is 'North of the Rio Grande'—word for word, the melodrama-comedy my father finally got around to writing. There's a play or a novel in every newspaperman, is the old saying, and my father was a well-known New York reporter until his health made him quit for Tucson, Arizona. He had a good job on the newspaper there. Twelve years or so ago Waldemar Harrod came through, but he wasn't Waldemar Harrod then. He was Walter Hertz, owner of a small carnival that wintered in Tucson. He was from New

York and in show business, of course father liked to talk with him and reminisce about Broadway, the shows and restaurants. Father was always talking about his writing a play some day, Walter Hertz was a blustering, pushing showman, full of his own greatness. He kept telling father some day he'd be Broadway's biggest producer.

"Then Hertz went on. I'd never liked him. He had a queer look in his eye when he used to watch me as a child and he was always trying to fondle me. When the war came I was studying dramatics in St. Louis, my father did everything he could to help me get on the stage. I went with the USO out in the Pacific and out there I got the news of my father's death."

She paused and the shade of an old sorrow darkened her eyes.

"There was nothing I could do those thousands of miles away, nothing at all. Father had written me he was writing a play but I didn't take it very seriously. Then one day I came on a copy of an old Denver newspaper sent to my roommate. It told of the trial of two highwire performers in a circus, accused of trying to murder the owner, Walter Hertz, in Denver. They were part of a three-member family act, The Highwire Hoffas, with their sister who was killed when the wire unexpectedly broke.

"Apparently crazed with rage they shot and stabbed Walter Hertz and they got five years for it. There was a sensational scene at their sentencing when they swore they would hunt up Hertz and kill him for good as soon as they got out for what he had done to their sister. No, I never saved the paper, it just reminded me of a piece of the past. When I left the USO I played in companies out West, it wasn't until a couple of months ago I reached New York and planned to make it a permanent base. Then I had the trunk of papers and private effects my father left sent on to me here. And in the trunk I found—"

"Yes?" prompted Bruce.

"Exhibit A: An old photograph from the theatrical page of a New York newspaper of Walter Hertz, captioned 'Waldemar Harrod, Broadway's newest producer.' Exhibit B: The carbon of a letter father had written to Waldemar Harrod, reminding him of the old days and stating he was submitting a copy of the play he had at last written and asking Hertz-Harrod to take good care of it as it was the only one available. Exhibit C: A letter signed Waldemar Harrod acknowledging receipt of 'North of the Rio Grande' and regretting neither he nor any other Broadway producer he knew of could use a Western at the present time as they were box-office poison, but saying he would keep the copy and try to interest Hollywood. Best of all, Exhibit D: The copyright slip from the Bureau of Copyrights, Washington, where father had filed two copies Harrod knew nothing about.

"Father's death soon afterwards naturally appeared in the New York papers, he was a well-known reporter here in his time. Harrod saw it, stole the play thinking there were no more copies, gave it his name after turning it into a musical and has walked off with a fortune in author's royalties and movie rights, besides the producer's profit."

"Nice chap, Hertz-Harrod," said Bruce quietly. "He seems to have deserved what he got. So after the circus mixup he sold his circus, changed his name, and headed for Broadway."

"That seems to be about it. He's always been described as a mystery man on the Main Stem with a wolf's addiction for women. And so when I got that evidence I sent him a theatrical photo of Alicia Carlson, the blonde, and asked for a job in his forthcoming revue. I got the appointment and somehow Waldemar Harrod got his. The gun I carried was in my father's effects. I took it along to give him the shock of his life, if he tried anything on me. I fired it to see if it was in working order at an old can against the back wall of the court behind my Greenwich Village apartment before I came uptown. It worked all right."

"But you didn't shoot him. You could have, but you didn't."

Strain knotted Carol's forehead. "Maybe I didn't shoot him. Maybe I did. I'll never know until my gun is matched with the bullet that got him. You see, when I laid this evidence before him he laughed. He said he could produce all the evidence he wanted that he bought 'Rio Grande' outright from father, rights to name as author of it and all that, for purposes of production, and I suppose he could forge stuff to back such a defense. The case would take years in the courts. In the meantime, he told

me that he knew 'Crossroads' was flopping, which it is, that summer is here and the show business in a slump and that like ninety percent of actresses, I'll be broke in two weeks. So then—" flame leaped into her eyes— "so then he told me he had a special penthouse apartment on Riverside Drive and I could have it when the show closed as he had always remembered me as a pretty child and that I had grown still prettier. Then—"

Recollection flooded her face. It was decisive, filled with fury.

"I said, 'You hound, you ought to be shot' and drew the gun from my bag and hit him as hard as I could with the barrel on the side of his head. He sat there dazed, as I remember, but I don't remember much. I swear I saw red, the whole office went swirling crazily around me. The next thing I can recall I was going down the stairs into the street. Yes, maybe I did shoot him."

Maybe she had. Instinctively Bruce's hand touched the automatic in his pocket. If the rifling of its barrel matched the bullet in Waldemar Harrod's head—What was it the newspapers called it? The Last Mile? If Ballistics at Headquarters found the rifling did not match the bullet, or the bullet was never found? There still was the evidence and circumstantial evidence went in New York City.

"When I heard that man shrieking out to get the girl in the green suit I must have lost my head," said Carol. "I ditched the gun and ran into Charley's place. We use its back lounge from the theatre all the time, it's so handy. I called Kay Post, my best friend in the cast, to see if she could give me another street costume, she's my size. But you heard what Pop, the doorkeeper, said—she's left. Why that man followed me and tried to get me in the court, I don't know and I'll never know."

"There's an answer," said Bruce grimly. "There's an answer to every question or angle in this puzzle. But the first thing to do is to get you clear and under cover. Then somehow I'll have to scout around and get to the bottom of this business. Get out of that green suit fast, it's your last link to Alicia Carlson."

"I'll go down the corridor to Kay's dressing room. She usually has a dress or so going out to the cleaners or coming back in there. Our own stage costumes are evening dress. I'll be back as soon as I can."

She slipped through the door, closing it. Bruce sat down facing the dressing table, drawing the knife from his waistband and hefting it. He stared at it closely for the first time. It was a strange, gaudy weapon with big glass imitation jewels set in its hilt but its balance was perfect and its steel was razor sharp. He laid it on the table amid the cosmetics and took out the automatic. This was the weapon that could clear or utterly damn Carol by a ballistics test. And did he dare let Ballistics have it? No, he did not.

One moment Carol had been walking out of Waldemar Harrod's office, her mind a blank from rage, the next Hughey had walked in and found him shot with Daddy Long-legs to testify he had seen the girl putting the gun back into her bag. He himself if he gave his own evidence of her threat on the stand would finish weaving a terrible net about her.

HE SLIPPED out the automatic's clip, found a cord and a small piece of face cleaning cloth on the table, tore the cloth and fashioned a pullthrough. At least he could remove the evidence that the gun had been fired. A dab of vaseline from a face pot went on the bit of cloth and he began to draw the cleaning rag through the barrel. Long minutes had passed but he hadn't expected Carol back at once. Without a doubt she would alter her facial makeup. After that a council of war in some secluded spot and after that—

"Tampering with the evidence, pal?" A big, freckled left hand clamped on his wrist, a freckled right hand took the gun away from him. Beside Bruce loomed the man he had never heard enter the dressing room behind his back. He was short and burly-shouldered, sandy-haired, steely blue of eye and steely also of jaw, a powerful and tough citizen. There was an air of authority and acrid shrewdness about him. "Just a friendly accessory after the fact?"

"Huh-er—" ejaculated Bruce disjointedly.

"Where's Alicia Carlson? We want the little lady. I'm Sergeant Marty Fredericks of the Broadway Squad."

Bruce looked up at the detective whose

name was a legend on Broadway, a terror to evildoers and gangsters, a past master at getting to the bottom of trouble along the Main Stem. He knew all its answers. Hardly a week went by without something or other about Marty Fredericks appearing in the gossip or news columns. Here was an invincible enemy of crime and this enemy was on Carol's trail already. He had come as straight as an arrow to her first hiding place.

"I don't know where Alicia Carlson is," said Bruce tensely. "What do you want her for?"

"The business of Waldemar Harrod being bumped off with a .32 in his office next block from here. We also want a young man about twenty-eight, thin features, rangy build, who was in the office at the time and ran like hell for a doctor, thereby vanishing into the night. You fit, pal, and there's a .32 in your hand."

"How'd you get here?" managed Bruce.

"Alicia Carlson's signed picture by Barony, the theatrical photog, was lying on Waldemar's desk. I called Barony and got him working overtime as usual in his studio, and he looked up the address he sent the pictures to in his books. Regina Theater, this house. There are four officers combing this theater for her right now. Clam up if you want, she won't get far."

HE STEPPED to the door and his voice bomed down the corridor and out into the empty space of the theatre. "Found her yet, boys?"

Somewhere a voice answered. "Nothin' but scrubwomen so far, Sarge."

"Keep it up. I got a prospect."

A quick sigh of relief broke from Bruce. In some way Carol Lane had disappeared, she had pulled a fast one under the noses of the searchers. Sergeant Fredericks stepped over and lifted the gaudy knife from the dresser table.

"What's this gewgaw? Pal, you seem to bristle with deadly weapons. I suppose you pack a permit for all this stuff?"

"No," said Bruce.

"Three years under the Sullivan Law in case you beat a stiffer rap. You can consider yourself dated up from now on."

Under the dry casual humor was a deadly seriousness and Bruce stiffened. There was no daylight ahead for him now, it seemed, he had been caught out cold in possession of the tools of murder.

"Wanta turn State's evidence and clear yourself?"

"No, damn you!"

"Didn't think you would, pal. You look a little set in your ways for such a young feller. Come along for a walk." Bruce got up. "Fall into step with me. That's the way the boys all walk, in step, up where you're headed for."

They went through the door into the corridor and along it to the empty stage. A policeman stood by the far door that gave into the lobby, a second was moving about the stage staring upward, there would be another pair somewhere else.

"Keep on looking, boys." Frederick's voice suddenly became a bellow that echoed under the lonely house roof. "There are all kinds of spots to hole up in a theatre and Alicia Carlson is still in this one. I've got her boy friend, he's going into a nice quiz session back at Waldemar Harrod's office and he's in plenty wrong. He'll get the works."

He gripped Bruce by the arm and took him over the footlights and down into the aisle. The startled faces of the scrubwomen stared at them, from the ranks of seats under which they were brooming.

"Evening, ladies!" boomed Fredericks. "Striking pay dirt amidst the lost shoes? Don't forget to remove the chewing gum from the bottoms of the seats. Return any found valuables to the front office and receive a suitable reward."

Off at a far aisle a single wrapper-clad figure was paying no attention to the famous Broadway detective. It was going along with its broomwork, the shapeless wrapper and the dustcloth made it nothing but an indistinct nonentity. But where Bruce had subconsciously noted six charwomen on the way in there were now seven. And he knew, with a sudden heart-warming certainty who it was. At the right moment the seventh charwoman would sidle to one of the fire exits giving onto the night and break clear of the police net. She would be out and free.

The glitter of the knife that Fredericks was carrying in his hand caught his eye. She would be out and clear in the night, yes, but somewhere in the night there was

an unknown enemy who still would be on her trail beside the police. His throat tightened, the blackness of depression gripped him.

"Stage door's locked," said Frederick's cheerfully. "Out the front and back up the alley. We shall re-enact the course of your runout." They passed through the lobby into the street, turned and went back up the alley and through the door into the dingy courtyard. "Love is wonderful, ain't it?" said Fredericks. "Known her a long time or was it at first sight?"

"Sergeant Fredericks," snapped Bruce. "You go to hell!"

"It is nothing unusual for a gent to get up and give his chair to a lady, pal. It is, however, unusual for a gent to sit down in the chair that rightly belongs to the lady. You wanta sit in the hot squat to cover up this dizzy blonde? They're a dime a dozen on the Main Stem."

Bruce cursed silently. Carol Lane was one in a million, one in ten million, one in one hundred and forty million which happened to be the population of the United States.

III

"FIRST it was a beehive of jobhunters, now it's a kennel of bloodhounds."

Hughey Malloy stood staring defiantly at the roomful of men from Homicide, the Medical Examiner's Bureau and the D.A.'s office. There were cameras, police paraphernalia and people in blue and plain clothes all over the private office of Waldemar Harrod. Waldemar Harrod himself was just being lifted into a basket which moved for the door with burly carriers.

"Now here comes Marty Fredericks himself with another inmate. Hello, Shakespeare."

Bruce stood quietly beside the Broadway sergeant. The rest of the short walk back through the courtyard and the rear of Charley's Cocktail Corner had been accomplished in a mutual silence. He had made up his mind what his job was from now on. To keep his mouth shut. Apparently Hughey Malloy had no intention of doing the same with his. He was poised, tough, rebellious, lashing at all authority.

"I got him, Inspector Travis," said Fredericks to the big-bodied, middle-aged man with the strong face. "Evening, District Attorney Beldon." Thus to a slight, keen-faced man in a light gray suit. "We've got the girl bottled up in the theatre. The boys will either find her there and bring her over or she'll be picked up with the teletype description. I brought this one in right away. Found him cleaning a thirty-two and it was a thirty-two got Waldemar. Here it is for Ballistics." He drew out the gun and put it on the shining desktop.

"Ballistics won't prove anything," grunted the inspector. "Medic reports Waldemar had a skull like tissue paper. The bullet went clean through it and out that window into that brick wall." He pointed to the open window, giving onto the side of the office and the building wall not two feet away. "What's left of the slug, if it's found, will be squashed flat."

Bruce tensed. Nothing at all now to clear Carol. Against her—

"It was the girl, all right. I've heard this witness' story that he never saw her putting a gun back into her bag." Inspector Travis jerked his thumb at Daddy Long-legs huddled on a couch by the wall. "We want the girl."

"Not necessarily, Inspector," said Fredericks. His jaw shot out pugnaciously. "There's some quaint angles in this. Hughey here was threatening to kill Waldemar only night before last in a Broadway joint where he was drunk as nine goats. You'd be amazed what comes to my ears. Howsa 'bout it, Hughey? You got the motive, okay."

"Huh?" demanded Hughey. "Motive, me? Lookit those walls." He pointed toward the array of signed women's theatrical portraits. "Every dame in that gallery has the motive to bump off Waldemar. Why pick on me? I had no great love for Waldemar, sweetheart, but he paid me a pleasingly plump salary. One hundred bucks a week. I don't shoot Santa Claus."

"He did like hell." Marty Fredericks gaze became steely. "You were down for one hundred bucks of which you got a stinking forty to carouse on Broadway with. The missing sixty he deducted to pay back for the three thousand you hoisted a year ago when you worked in the box office of 'Heart of Texas' and had access to the safe. Knocking off Waldemar would be a re-

fresher course for you after three years killing Japs in the Marines."

"Why you big hunk of Edam!" Hughey's large mouth twisted in a raging snarl. He looked tougher than ever, a man trained to kill in war. Bruce glimpsed behind the Broadway veneer and professional patter a steel core of resolution and utter fearlessness. This Hughey Malloy must have been one hell of a Marine.

"Oh yes, pal, the little bird or the big buzzard that passes news out around the Main Stem tipped me off that Waldemar had had his safe picked for three grand so I drifted around to investigate. Waldemar told me the business was wound up, he had a written confession from the light-fingered gent and was letting him work it out for restitution at the rate of sixty a week, the three grand having gone down the drain at Belmont in one afternoon. So maybe you walked in after the girl left, plugged Waldemar and walked out. Forty a week left out of a 'C' to live on and keep up a front on Broadway is marbles. Anybody is likely to blow his top these postwar days. Hughey, maybe you're an N.P. who blew his. You wouldn't run out the rest of your restitution contract with Waldemar."

"Run out the rest of it? Blast his guts!" Hughey's face fell into terrible lines. "I finished it last week and today I get the same forty bucks in the pay envelope. When I went in and squawked what did that louse say with a grin? 'You'll either keep on working for me at forty bucks a week, Hughey, or I'll turn your written confession in; it's still good. I'll just swear you quit on the restitution. Work in this nice, pleasant office for forty,' says Waldemar, 'or work for six cents a day in the non-air-conditioned Ossining shoe factory, board and uniform free.' God, he had me! He had me for the rest of my life!"

"So you shot him?" Marty Fredericks turned to Inspector Travis. "Inspector, you mind if I take it from here? I know this Broadway stuff."

"Take it, Marty."

"Shoot him? If I didn't I should have. And so help me Steve, I would have some day. Try for a job somewhere else, says Waldemar, 'And I'll turn you in.' The blackmailing heel! Money was his life's blood. If you'd pumped a thousand dollar bill into his veins like plasma he'd of come back from the dead."

"So you shot him?" repeated Fredericks.

"Where's the gun? I got no gun, Edam."

"You could lean out that window and sling it along the street, landing it five buildings from here. Or you could sling it clean across the street, Pal Hughey. And on Broadway there are plenty characters would pick up a gun, run like hell with it to the nearest wise place they know and sell it for fifty bucks. Guns are high on the black market, keep selling and reselling a hot rod that started in New York and it ends up in Arkansaw. Don't worry, the street outside is being broomed."

"Yah;" yelled Hughey. "Yah, bubble gum brain!"

"Not so bubble gum."

"Yah!" yelled Hughey again and held out his wrists. "Put the bracelets on, smart pants! So that lets me in and the gal out of it."

"It does not let anybody out of it," said Fredericks shortly. "Somebody else is in it too, up to his neck. This Bruce laddie here that I found cleaning up the thirty-two in Alicia Carlson's dressing room, of all places to run for a doctor after the shooting. And here's something else I picked up, Inspector." He drew the imitation jewel studded knife from his waistband and laid it on the desk. "Gaudy bit of work, isn't it? But it can kill."

"Circus stuff," snorted Hughey disparagingly. "Or carny stuff. Out of a knife-throwing act. I've seen a dozen of those when I spent time in the tent-show biz. Oh, that's real steel in it but what the hell has a shiv got to do in this—"

"Might have," said Fredericks. Bruce found his mind reaching for something, he didn't know what, and failing to find it. "When we're through here, Brucie pal, there'll be a little trip down to Headquarters or the D.A.'s office for the real quiz session. You're going to be asked questions until your dome spins. So's Hughey."

"I got a deaf ear," said Hughey.

"We'll restore your hearing. As for the jill with the blonde bob we'll turn her up any minute now."

"Yes?" said Bruce.

"Yes, and I mean it."

"I saw her shoving the gun back into her

bag, I tell you!" Over on the couch Daddy Long-legs was sitting up, his chalky, seamed face working. His eyes flared, "And Waldemar Harrod, too, I could see where he sat through the letter slot. He was dead, I'll swear it! It was the girl!"

"We have your statement already, Miller," cut in Assistant District Attorney Beldon. "Save any repeating or amplification until we go over it later. We've got plenty on the girl but where is she?"

"She'll turn up I tell you," said Marty Fredericks.

Bruce turned his head. There was a sudden commotion in the reception office outside and through the open door he saw a police sergeant bar the path of someone who had just come through the door to the suite.

"No one allowed in," he was growling. "I'm telling ya!"

"Press," rose a girl's voice and Bruce tensed to the core. He would know that voice anywhere. "New York *Clarion*. I've just heard and came fast."

"No press!" snapped the Assistant D.A. "Keep those newshawks downstairs on the sidewalk."

"Okay, Mr. District Attorney Beldon," called the sergeant.

"Outside, young lady. Here, here, stop!"

Ignoring the command the slim figure in evening dress, auburn-haired and vivid with life swept into the inner office. It was all over now, thought Bruce. Here was Carol Lane plunging out of the night into the last place where she should be, even if her real appearance were unknown. She had won to safety and she had thrown it away.

"Sorry, Mr. District Attorney. Sorry, police. I'm Tony Telfair, The *Clarion*. I've got a tough city editor who doesn't take no from the help."

"Out of here Miss Tony Telfair," ordered Beldon. "Join the rest of the press on the asphalt."

"I can give you something if you give me something," said Carol. She was poised, alert, drivingly confident, although a tiny muscle in her cheek twitched. For an instant her glance met and held Bruce's. They had in them a strange expression, one of depth and hope. "I stopped in after the theatre with my roommate at a Broadway cocktail lounge when the word spread that Waldemar Harrod had been shot. I'm new on the *Clarion*, on the Café Society and nightery run. I figured I could get here faster than any of the city news staff from our building. I said I can trade and I will."

"Trade what?" inquired District Attorney Beldon. "You'd better make it fast. How'd you get by the gate downstairs where we're keeping the mob out?"

"Told the police I had special information for the law," said Carol quickly. "Did you know Waldemar Harrod is really Walter Hertz, an old carnival and circus man with plenty of enemies in his past?"

"No," said Beldon. He brushed his hand in a quick gesture over his clean-shaven, sharp chin. "Get this, stenographer. Go on. How'd you know that?"

"Newspaper work in Denver where I started out. He brought his circus there and I did special features on it. He was Walter Hertz then, his performers hated his guts and spilled plenty to me on him. Now, I've traded you something you trade me back. Are these two men held on suspicion of the murder?" She indicated Bruce and Hughey, then Daddy Long-legs. "And who's this queerie?"

"These two men are held," Marty Fredericks abruptly cut in. His eyes were narrowed. "I'll make it a bit stronger. They're in trouble. Both of them. Also a girl named Alicia Carlson we're hunting. Can you help on that?"

Carol shook her head. "Never heard of her. Never saw either of these two before, but why should I? Names?"

"Gordon Bruce, Hughey Malloy."

"I'll flash that to my city editor for a bulletin. I see the private booth."

Carol swerved on light feet and swung open the door of the double-sized booth that backed hugely against the wall, solid wood except for a small peephole, and closed it behind her. Almost instantly Bruce heard her voice. The booth was not completely soundproof, her voice carried fragmentarily.

"Mr. Griswold? Listen Mr. Griswold—yes, yes!" The voice dropped and was indistinguishable for a moment.

Bruce's fists clenched at his sides. This was some kind of a bluff he was hearing but what was it leading to? For some reason of her own, Carol had come back into the

heart of danger. She was a superb little actress, she was playing the part of a newspaper woman to perfection. After all, as a newspaperman's daughter she should be able to do it. It was the third personality he had seen her in that night.

"Yes— yes— Mr. Griswold," Carol's voice lifted. "I'll ask them. You're rushing a bulletin? —Good" The door of the oversize telephone booth swung open and Carol leaned out, one hand holding the receiver to her ear, her face excited. "Mr. Bruce, Mr. Malloy, will you please step in here? I need your ages, addresses and so forth." The look she threw at Bruce was compelling. There was now even more meaning in it, a dauntless determination. She wanted them in that booth.

"No, you don't" said District Attorney Beldon. "To hell with the press!"

"Let 'em go," said Marty Fredericks quietly. "I gotta reason."

Bruce and Hughey moved to the booth and into it. Carol's hand drew the door to. Her eyes shone.

"Carol!" husked Bruce. "Have you gone nuts? Coming back here!"

"To get you out," she whispered. "I'd changed into evening dress for lack of any other and just left Kay Post's dressing room when I saw the Broadway detective and the police coming in the front house door. I jumped for the charwomen's closet at the corridor end where there are always extra wrappers and cleanup stuff and rigged out as a charwoman. I heard the sergeant on the stage telling that you were caught and going back to this office. So I slipped out of the theatre, by a side door, threw off the charwoman clothes and came here to get you out. Did you think after you helped me I wouldn't help you? Out, out of here, quick!"

She reached out her hand and pressed on the wall of the booth. It swung wide, disclosing a dark gap cut through the wall of the building. She shoved against the back wall opposite and a door in it gave onto a second booth beyond which appeared a room dimly lit by the street illumination.

"Waldemar Harrod's private love nest, opening off his office. I didn't have time to tell you everything at the theatre. When he made his Riverside Drive penthouse proposition to me as Alicia Carlson, he added, 'If you want to see the style I do things in step into that phone booth and through the wall into the next building.' So there was a way out for you two if I could get you into the booth."

She turned quickly back and let her voice rise.

"Yes, Mr. Griswold— Oh, this is Rewrite? Well, sharpen the pencil, Rewrite." She lowered to a whisper. "I'll keep talking here a few minutes. You go through the wall and find out how to get us out of the next building. Never mind the questions, get going."

"Okay, sister." Hughey shot out his palm. "Just one thing first. Let me shake the hand that held the gun that rubbed out Waldemar. Lady, I did all I could to foul the whole works up and I think I did it. Come on, Shakespeare."

"With you in a minute," breathed Carol.

Bruce stepped through the wall and the booth into a big room. Enough light was coming through its Venetian blinds from the street to show the deep couches, the superb furniture, the small chromium bar. Tapestries hung on its walls, oil paintings showed. It was seductive luxury in a Broadway office building.

"The thousand and first Arabian Night on the Main Stem," growled Hughey. "Waldemar the Wolf, isn't the first to have his little love nest off his office. But was he smart? In all the time I've sat out front I never knew of this haymow. Shakespeare, we'll take it on the lam from here, the three of us, and operate in the fresh air instead of a cell tier. Some jill, that redhead.

"So she was Alicia Carlson. Well, by God, I'll sweat my guts out to cover her trail. There's been murder in my soul for a week and she saved me from it. I'll fight to the finish to protect anybody who erased Waldemar from the Broadway map. I damn well think sooner or later I'd of bumped him off."

"Tough deal he gave you, Hughey." Bruce studied the tense, drawn face of the Broadway boy. "Hard to stand up under a threat of prison hanging over you."

"Listen, Shakespeare, you seem like a square guy." Hughey's mouth twitched. "It wasn't me the stone house was hanging over. It was my kid brother who played

the trumpet in the orchestra and naturally had the run of the front office in his offtime who lifted the three grand and blew it in a crap game. He's got talent that kid, Dennis, he blows a trumpet like the Angel Gabriel. I got no talent, I'm just a Broadway heel. I took the rap for Dinty—he's changed his course since then—just a kid who went astray with the wrong crowd. He's in Hollywood now with a big name band, he'll have his own some day.

"And that damned Waldemar knew it was him, he held it over me he'd turn Dinty in anytime he felt like it unless I worked for peanuts. It'd wreck the kid, I'm tough, I can take the rap. I got no career to lose; hell, as a hoofer I even failed to roll 'em in the aisles in Passaic, New Jersey. Thank God, Waldemar's dirty trap is shut, Dinty's out in the clear and he stays there. And anybody, Joe or Judy, who bumped off Waldemar is my pal. I owe 'em plenty. That ex-Alicia jill did it, and I know it and you know it, and we're both stalling the coppers to cover her up. Sure I gabbed myself right into a jam but so did you. Who is she, anyhow? Tell you?"

"Carol Lane, daughter of Gardner Lane, a newspaperman whose play 'Rio Grande' Waldemar stole and produced as 'Heart of Texas.' It's copyrighted in Washington, the evidence he cheated her father's estate out of a fortune is ironclad."

"So she shot him. Swell! Waldemar stole

everything that came into this place he thought he could get away with. As for the gals whose lives he messed up under promises of jobs—whew, the nostrils won't hold the complete stink, sweetheart!"

"You have all you can take right now, Rewrite?" Carol's voice came clearly into the secret room from the open booth door. "Put on another."

"We gotta get her clear," said Hughey. "I know these old rat-trap buildings. I'll case this one for a getaway. When I signal you grab the jill out of that booth and we'll lam. I'll contact Manny Mandelbaum, the smartest legal brain on Broadway. He always has an angle."

HE WENT across the room for the door, double time. "Spring lock, easy." He was through into a dimly-lit corridor, leaving Bruce alone in the room of half-shadows and illicit luxury. The street lights outside cast the reflections of the half-open Venetian blinds on the inner wall like the bars of a prison cell, black and grim. Bruce stiffened. Behind the bars a man moved, his figure splotched their parallel lines, a specter was slipping across the wall.

It was a weird, crazy thing he was looking at. The shadow of a man at second floor level, walking on air. He whirled around. Beyond the blinds the shadow traveled, passing slowly, but now it took on reality. A man was marching level with Bruce, outside on the street. From outside and below the command came.

"Keep moving, High Pockets. And I mean you. Block this sidewalk and I'll run you in."

Bruce crossed the floor to the blinds and

peered through them at the strange figure. On its back it bore a big white sandwich board with the red lettering: "Eat at Beefsteak Joe's."

It clumped sure-footedly along on its gigantically high stilts. It was one of the pair of publicity stiltwalkers he had seen before—still making his rounds on the Main Stem, advertising the edibles of Beefsteak Joe.

"Okay, Shakespeare." Hughey was back, sliding through the door, his eyes bright and his bearing confident. "Get the little lady. I've cased pretty. No chance by the front door, the sidewalk is stiff with cops and the crowds still there. There's a fire-escape at the back window of the hall, this floor, that serves both buildings, we go down it into a crumby backyard of some kind and pick our way out into the next block. Coast's smooth for the getaway."

BRUCE moved back into the booth and signaled to Carol, still talking away beautifully. Lightly she came through the gap into the hidden room and Bruce pointed to the door.

They went out into the dim hall, along it with Hughey guiding, turned a corner, traversed a short space with the closed, blank doors of unlighted offices walling it and came to the window.

"It'll be swing onto the ladder and let it drop," said Hughey. "I'll go first." He slipped onto the fire-escape that stretched along the buildings to the weighted ladder. "C'mon aboard, boys and girls."

Bruce went next and helped Carol onto the ladder. It was held up by a counterpoise and the weight of their bodies sent it swinging slowly down until its bottom rested on the yard pavement.

Hughey leaped nimbly off, Bruce and Carol quickly followed. The automatic escape, freed of their weight, rose slowly back into its old position.

"Never a trace of the fugitives," chortled Hughey. "Getting out of here is pie. Walk, do not run to the nearest exit."

"You can start walking right now," said a calm steely voice. "Right back where you came from."

Sergeant Marty Fredericks stood not four yards away in a doorway that gave onto the yard.

IV

"OKAY, pals, tried a runout and flopped. This way, please."

"Damn you!" snarled Hughey. "Damn you, you smart Edam! How'd you get here?"

"How many gambling joints do you think I've helped raid, pal? In how many of 'em did we find three or four housemen and no customers because by the time we got through the front door they were all into a closet, pushed on its wall and stepped out into the next building for a clean lam? That phone booth was too big for its purpose and had no glass door. I suspected it so I let you all into it to see what would happen. I just sent a few men to the back of this building and the next. Then that queerie, Miller, who's got sharper ears than I got squawked, 'She's stopped talking. I hear footsteps going away. They must be going through the wall' and I opened the booth door. Vacant as Wall Street on Sunday. So I walked quick down here and have been watching your fire-escape act for a full minute. Forward march, Marine, forward march, Brucie pal. Also you, lady."

Bruce said nothing. They went into the building and up the stairs and once more he confronted the closed door with "Waldemar Harrod Enterprises" lettered on it. Marty Fredericks wrapped his big fist about its knob and twisted but the door stuck. He exerted his strength and it flew wide, accompanied by a loud yell and a metallic crash.

A couple of feet inside the front office stood a young patrolman with pain on his face.

"Keep your bottom away from door knobs, Rookie," said Fredericks.

"Sorry, Sarge," returned the patrolman. "I was standing there, yes, and something slammed me hard as hell. It's the mail basket."

Fredericks swung the door to. On the floor lay a heavy metal shield and mechanically Bruce bent down, as the nearest to it, and picked it up, staring curiously.

"It hangs over the letter slot inside, sweetheart," said Hughey. "Postmen just love to sling letters through an open mail slot six feet onto the floor where everybody steps on 'em. I had that shield hung on so any letter pushed through the slot hits it and falls

straight down into the basket. Gimme, Shakespeare, I like to keep the office tidy. I'll keep my little cell tidy and neat as a pin too, Sergeant Marty Edam Fredericks. Yah!"

Hughey hung the metal shield on its frame. "Lead on, Warden."

"I'm leading," said Fredericks grimly and they marched into the front office, still densely populated with the law. District Attorney Beldon stared icily, Inspector Travis glowered.

"Got 'em, okay. Eloping by the fire-escape in the next building." The door to the phone booth stood open, the door beyond to the hidden love nest was open also and the room was lighted with figures moving around inside it.

"Well, Miss Telfair?" inquired Beldon.

Carol drew a deep breath. She was going to fight, Bruce sensed, going to fight with every ounce of her wits and courage and she had plenty of both.

"I happened to lean against the phone booth wall and it opened into the next building," she said. "I told Mr. Griswold my city editor, so low you couldn't hear me I could get both Hughey Lane and Bruce out and he said to snatch them and bring them straight down to the *Clarion* for exclusive statements and information, that if I did that we'd scoop the town. So I did. Just newspaper enterprise."

Sergeant Marty Fredericks looked at her admiringly. "You're wonderful," he remarked. "That stuff came right off one of those front-page newspaper movies where the reporter snatches the suspect and hides him away while he or she solves the mystery. Nice try, Miss Tony Telfair of the *Clarion*. Nice try, Miss Alicia Carlson."

"Good God." The exclamation jolted from Bruce.

"The old camera eye, Brucie pal. D'you think a blonde wig can hide the shape of the features, the chin and the width between the eyes, to say nothing of the set of the ears? There's Alicia Carlson's photograph on Waldemar's desk, I registered it in the old memory. So when Miss Tony Telfair of the *Clarion* comes barging in, auburn-haired with Alicia Carlson's features, who d'you suppose I think she is? I was pretty sure I had her smoked out in the theatre.

"Smoked out?" repeated Bruce.

"That bellowing of mine from the stage that I was taking you along as an accomplice was a come-on. You were helping her, she'd help you. I was damn sure she was somewhere about the Regina and would hear my yell and I figured she'd get out into the crowd somehow to see how you were making out and help if she could. I passed the word to look for her among the spectators down below, I hadn't reckoned she has the nerve of one in a thousand and would walk right in here to give you a clean lam. I know you're not Tony Telfair, I don't even think your right name is Alicia Carlson, young lady. But whatever it is we'll dig it up from the casting agency that got you your job, your residence, checkbooks, letters, and so forth."

"You needn't bother," said Carol. Her mouth was set, her cheeks white. "I'm Carol Lane daughter of Gardner Lane, who wrote 'North of the Rio Grande,' the play Waldemar Harrod stole and produced as 'Heart of Texas'."

Marty Fredericks gave her a long stare. "The biggest steal Broadway has seen this century. And so—well, Mr. Belton, we've got the motive, principal and accessories. This Hughey character for some smart idea of his own tried to smear up the investigation.

"Bruce musta been love at first sight and after that cluttered the case in all directions."

"You've got her! You've got her!" It was half a scream from the chalky-faced Daddy Long-legs, still on the couch. "I saw her with the gun. Now you've got the gun and you've got her. You've got all you want!"

"I think we have. Enough to indict with," said Fredericks. D.A. Beldon nodded. "So down to the calaboose go the young lady and Bruce and we put Hughey in too for obstructing justice." Frederick's eyes narrowed. "And just for good measure, Mister Miller, we're holding you in the tank as a material witness. You're our big shot. Matter of fact, you're our only shot if Hughey and Bruce refuse to testify as I know damn well they will."

"Lock the louse up," snarled Hughey. "Lock him up with me and see what he looks like in the morning."

"Lock me up!" screamed Daddy Long-legs. "You can't do that to me! My partner and I, we have a contract—circus stuff—we join the show in Indiana day after tomorrow on the road. I'll come back anytime to testify. But you can't lock me up!" Sheer terror stared out of his eyes, the chalky pallor of his face seemed to deepen. He twitched like a wild animal suddenly faced with a cage. "Contract—circus—look—circus clowns!" He tore the paper from his pocket and held it out.

Something seemed to explode in Bruce's brain— Circus stuff! The knife that had been launched at him, that lay now on the desk was circus stuff. Daddy Long-legs, the only witness against Carol, was circus stuff too.

"Grab Hughey," said Marty Fredericks calmly. "He's gonna sock our star witness on the jaw."

Two patrolmen from behind Bruce jumped forward as Hughey bunched his fist and grabbed him. Behind them they left a vista of vacant space all the way to the entrance door and Bruce saw——

HE DROPPED to his hands and knees, facing the entrance, staring.

"You cuckoo, Shakespeare?" inquired Hughey, fast between the pair of patrolmen.

Bruce got up, dusting his knees, his pulses pounding. "Simmer down, Hughey," he said. "Daddy Long-legs isn't a witness for anybody. Sergeant Fredericks, he'll never testify in any court that he saw Carol Lane through the letter slot yonder putting a gun back into her bag."

"What's that?" inquired Fredericks.

"For the damned good reason nobody can see through that letter slot. Look at the metal shield that hangs over it. It hangs for inches down under the opening. But he doesn't know that because he never looked at it closely. He's testifying to a lie. He wants the police to pin the killing on Carol Lane. And why?"

"You—" An insane rage flooded Daddy Long-legs' seamed face.

"Circus stuff. Daddy Long-legs and partner. There were two circus men of a family act, brothers, that Waldemar Harrod sent to the pen in Denver years ago who swore to kill him when they got out. Carol, you know their names. Give them to Sergeant Fredericks. Sergeant Fredericks, you step into that booth and you'll have the Colorado State Prison on the wire in five minutes. Ask them if the highwire brothers either have broken out of the prison or got parole. Carol, the names!"

"Gimme, young lady," crackled Fredericks.

A sudden surge of hope swept into Carol's eyes. " They were Herman and—

"Get her! Get her, Adolf! Shut her—"

THE shot slammed from six feet away, the second shot came after it. Bruce launched himself in a standing dive as a lock of hair blew from Carol's bob and tackled her, bringing her to the floor behind the cover of the desk. Something tore at the shoulder of his coat, the third shot. In that single instant he had seen, framed in the open window at the office level, the weird figure he had seen before, the sandwich board with "Eat at Beefsteak Joe's." Glaring, dilated eyes with a murderous flare stared from the contorted face, the outstretched hand jetted flame. And Bruce knew the face, it was that of the man who had crouched at the telephone booth beside Carol and who had thrown the knife at him and leaped the fence.

"Bring him down!"

The command broke from Sergeant Marty Fredericks, his hand flashed under his armpit and came out. The police positive in it slammed, more shots slammed. The splotches of bulletholes tore the sandwich sign, a hole burst in the center of the wild-eyed man's forehead and he teetered to and fro, the gun falling from his hand. Then he began to topple.

"Timber!" yelled Hughey. "There he goes!" The weird figure vanished from the window, sliding sideways and from the pavement came the thud of a body and the splintering of wood. "No, no, Daddy Long-legs, no, you don't!" Hughey plunged forward and threw a chokehold on the chalky-faced clown who was on his feet, darting doorward. "Quit wiggling, you poor fish, you're hooked!"

Sergeant Fredericks stood braced like a prize-fighter in the center of the office. He slid his gun back in its shoulder holster.

"Brucie pal," he said quietly. "You

smoked out something. That Colorado State Prison call did it."

"It did." Bruce drew a long breath. "It's the Hoffa brothers circus act who swore they'd have Waldemar Harrod's life for killing their sister. Carol Lane told me about them. That will be Adolph Hoffa out on the sidewalk on the stilts and this one, Daddy Long-legs Paul Miller will be Herman Hoffa. Between them they killed Harrod. Only someone who could actually see into this office would know Carol Lane had a gun. When Daddy Long-legs Hoffa volunteered the info it meant he'd actually seen her. He couldn't see through the letter slot but he could if he was in that phone booth with the peephole, creeping into it from the next building to kill Waldemar. He knew of the way through the wall, he yelled to you we were using it. He must have jumped out, shot Waldemar in seconds flat and jumped back. Then he rushed in here to pin it on the girl. Is there a jury who wouldn't convict her of murder on that eyewitness testimony added to the rest of the circumstantial evidence?"

"Airtight case," said District Attorney Beldon. He sweated a little.

"Get that Colorado phone call through, Sergeant," said Bruce. If the Hoffas are loose, ask for their fingerprints by airmail. Tomorrow before nightfall you'll have your evidence."

"For a playwright you seem to deal in facts, Brucie pal," remarked Fredericks. "All right, Daddy Long-legs Miller, are you Herman Hoffa or do we call Colorado?"

Hughey had released his chokehold and the chalk-faced, gangling man was collapsed on the couch. He licked his lips. "I'm Herman Hoffa, that was Adolf," he said hoarsely. "You've got us. We broke off the prison farm six months ago. But I—I didn't shoot Harrod."

"The he'l he didn't," snorted Hughey. "Frisk him for the gun."

Under probing police fingers the contents of Hoffa's pockets came out and went onto the desk. There they lay—a soiled handkerchief, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, two pawn tickets, a cheap silver watch and an odd-looking fountain pen. Fredericks picked up the pen and slipped its cap off, baring a hollow core at which he sniffed. He flicked at the clip and it came down like a trigger.

"Convict gun, hey, Hoffa? Damned ingenious prison-made firearm. Fires one thirty-two shell and this has been fired. Good at six inches from anyone's head. Come clean, you're licked. Make it easier for us and we may be able to make it easier for you."

"He killed my sister." It was a ghastly croak from Herman Hoffa. "She was infatuated with him, he betrayed her and when Adolph and I found it out we demanded he marry her. He laughed at us and we told him we'd kill him if he didn't for the honor of the Hoffa family, and he knew we meant it. So he filed the highwire to kill us first and save his skin. Adolf and I always went out on it ahead of Hedy but that night we changed the act and sent her in front of us. The filed wire broke, instead of our being killed, she was. So now I've killed him, blast his black soul!"

"Yes, we broke off the prison farm and came to New York on Walter Hertz's trail. When we got to New York his picture as Waldemar Harrod was all over, we had him spotted. We meant to kill him and cover our tracks. So we stilt-walked with that Beefsteak Joe sign we made ourselves, figuring to get him through the window. But his desk sat wrong for a shot off the stilts. Last night I was walking by on the stilts, I saw Harrod, as you call him, step into the phone booth and walked on. Inside half a dozen steps I was opposite the window of the next building and saw him step through the wall and another booth into his love nest where there was a swell doll waiting.

"Then I knew how to get into his office, a skeleton key to the hidden room would be easy. Just a matter of waiting till he was alone, go through the wall, jump out of the booth, shoot him and run. Adolf cased this office from the stilts tonight, I came into it to find out his appointments. The minute Malloy put me out I crossed into the next building by the fire-escape on this floor, used my key and slipped into the love nest and the booth. I got a break I never thought to have. The girl there" —he pointed to Carol— "drew a gun and slapped Harrod with it. She'd no more than slammed the door on the way out before I was across the floor and plugged Harrod. He never knew

what hit him, he was still confused by the girl's slap. Then I jumped back into the booth, used the fire-escape again and rushed in with my eye-witness story.

"I figured the police would take it and let me go, and the Hoffa part of Harrod's past would never be looked into. But when the sergeant said he'd lock me up—lock me up—lock me up!" His voice rose in an unearthly scream. "Adolf and I were locked up for three years. It killed us physically, we're acrobats and highwire artists. It ruined our muscles, our coordination and body rhythm. All we're good for now is stilt-walking clowns in a second-rate circus. And we were all clear until this damned playwright blew in. He guessed it when you coppers failed.

"I know my fingerprints are on the inside of that telephone booth door where I shoved it open and on the inside of the love nest booth door and once that playwright started to trace the Hoffas, we're caught and we're returned to serve another ten years even if we beat the Waldemar Harrod murder rap."

"So you tried to hang it on a girl," said Bruce. "And your brother Adolf tried to kill her with that circus knife in a courtyard across the street."

"Stir-crazy. Adolf came out of Colorado State Prison stir-crazy and took to drugs. He signaled to me on the street from the stilts that brought him up even with this office that Harrod was in. Then he was to get off the stilts in the nearest alley and wait for me across the street. He did. When I yelled from the window to get the girl in the green suit he must have thought it was a message from me to him. So he spotted her coming out of this building, trailed her and went for her. After that he got back onto the stilts and into the sandwich board and prowled these windows, trying to find out what I was doing. So Hedy is gone and Adolf is gone and in a little while, I'll be gone. I don't care. There's no more clean sweep of space under me, no more flying through the air, no more thrill or roars of applause or anything in life to make it worthwhile. Hertz-Harrod killed Adolf and I by our imprisonment just as surely as he killed Hedy. He ruined our bodies and our souls went along with them."

He stopped, his head sinking as though from utter emotional exhaustion. District Attorney Beldon nodded and his stenographer closed his book. Pothooks had taken down the entire story.

"Full confession. Type it for his signature and initialing of each page. Miss Lane, I'm glad you're clear, I hate like hell to go after an innocent person but it's happened before and it will happen again. Hughey Malloy and Bruce can go. We'll call you young men a pair of extremely ill-advised obstructionists and let it stand at that." A thin smile cracked his face. "Keep on with your playwriting, Bruce, you ought to end up at the top. You can use angles as a lot of produced playwrights I've seen can't and you seem to think in a straight line. Thanks, you've saved us a hell of a lot of grief."

"Okay, accessory," smiled Marty Fredericks. "Send me passes for a couple of seats at your first opening."

"I'll see you get 'em, you big Edam!" said Hughey. "They'll be second gallery—standing room."

"Hughey," said Fredericks, "you act tough, but at bottom you're nothing but an old Broadway softie. We seem to be cleared up here, Mister D.A. Beldon; suppose I take this Herman Hoffa along to the Tombs."

"Take him."

"You going quietly, Hoffa, or do you want the bracelets?"

Herman Hoffa's eyes flared crazily. "To the Tombs you say? To the Tombs?"

'Tombs is correct."

Hoffa rose and stepped into the center of the floor. A patrolman stepped to one side of him, a plainclothes detective to the other. The sound of a gong traveled the sidestreet, coming nearer every second.

"Morgue buggy again," said Fredericks. "Sent for for Adolf, out there on the pavement."

"Adolf," muttered Herman Hoffa. He turned and faced the open window where the weird figure with the sandwich board had appeared. "Adolf out there. Adolf gone—Hedy gone. Only Herman left of the Highwire Hoffas. Adolf! Hedy!" His voice rang, shrill and cracked. "I am coming!"

His feet drew together, spread one behind the other, he crouched suddenly and in a leap he left the floor. His body launched like an arrow, hands and arms outstretched and to Bruce, appalled, it fairly seemed to fly. He was yards only from the window, one instant he was in the room—the next his legs and feet were all that could be seen, shooting past and out over the window sill. Then they were gone, the whole man had projected himself into midair.

"I am coming!" rang the eerie cry again. And then the smashing, deadly thud of flesh on asphalt.

"He flew through the air with the greatest of ease," called Hughey, first at the window. "He didn't even try no double flip flop to land on his feet and lam. He never meant to lam. He meant to land on his dome and he did. Cross the entire Highwire Hoffa family act off the booking lists."

V

"HERE we are, sweethearts. Nothing like the nearest hamburger heaven in which to rehabilitate the nervous system after rehabilitating ourselves with the law." Hughey set the three double portions he had brought from the counter of the crowded restaurant down on the white-topped table and seated himself with Bruce and Carol. The strain of investigation was over, they had all been dismissed half an hour ago. "Stoke up the inner man and the inner woman. The hamburgers have now been grilled, instead of us."

A gigantic section of sandwich, liberally doused with ketchup, disappeared in his capacious mouth. His conversation began to emerge through it somewhat muffled.

"Any plans, Shakespeare, now you're back where you started from? The greatest unproduced playwright on the Main Stem. Me, I'd go for an agent if I could get the stuff to handle. Ten percent Hughey, the vampire in human form. Write me a three-acter to peddle, Shakespeare."

Bruce sagged a bit in his chair. It was true. He wasn't going into show business after all. Herman Hoffa's avenging bullet had blown away his chances of Broadway production. He sent a glance at Carol, tired-looking but still the most attractive girl he had ever met, clear now on her way to a fortune in royalties on "Heart of Texas," and he was going back to $75 a week in the advertising office.

"I haven't got a three-acter, Hughey."

"Yes, you have." Carol's face lightened radiantly. "You're a collaborator on a play of which the first act is completely done, the second in rough draft, and the third outlined in scenario-plot form."

"What?"

"Father's trunk. In it another play as good, if not better than 'Heart of Texas.' He didn't live to finish it. All it needs is someone with know-how to whip the second act into shape and write the third off the scenario. Is there any producer who wouldn't jump at a play by the author of 'Heart of Texas' with a posthumous collaborator?"

"Bright eyes," howled Hughey, "there's a fortune in it! Lemme handle. I'll suck the blood out of every producer on Broadway. If you can do sketches that Waldemar was ready to buy, you can sure write plays, Shakespeare. Grab it."

"You're agent, Hughey," smiled Carol.

"I want another burger to celebrate on." Hughey got to his feet. "I'll leave you two to gab over the collaboration." He winked wisely. "And something has told this Broadway character that you're going to collaborate on something else besides a play without much waste of time."

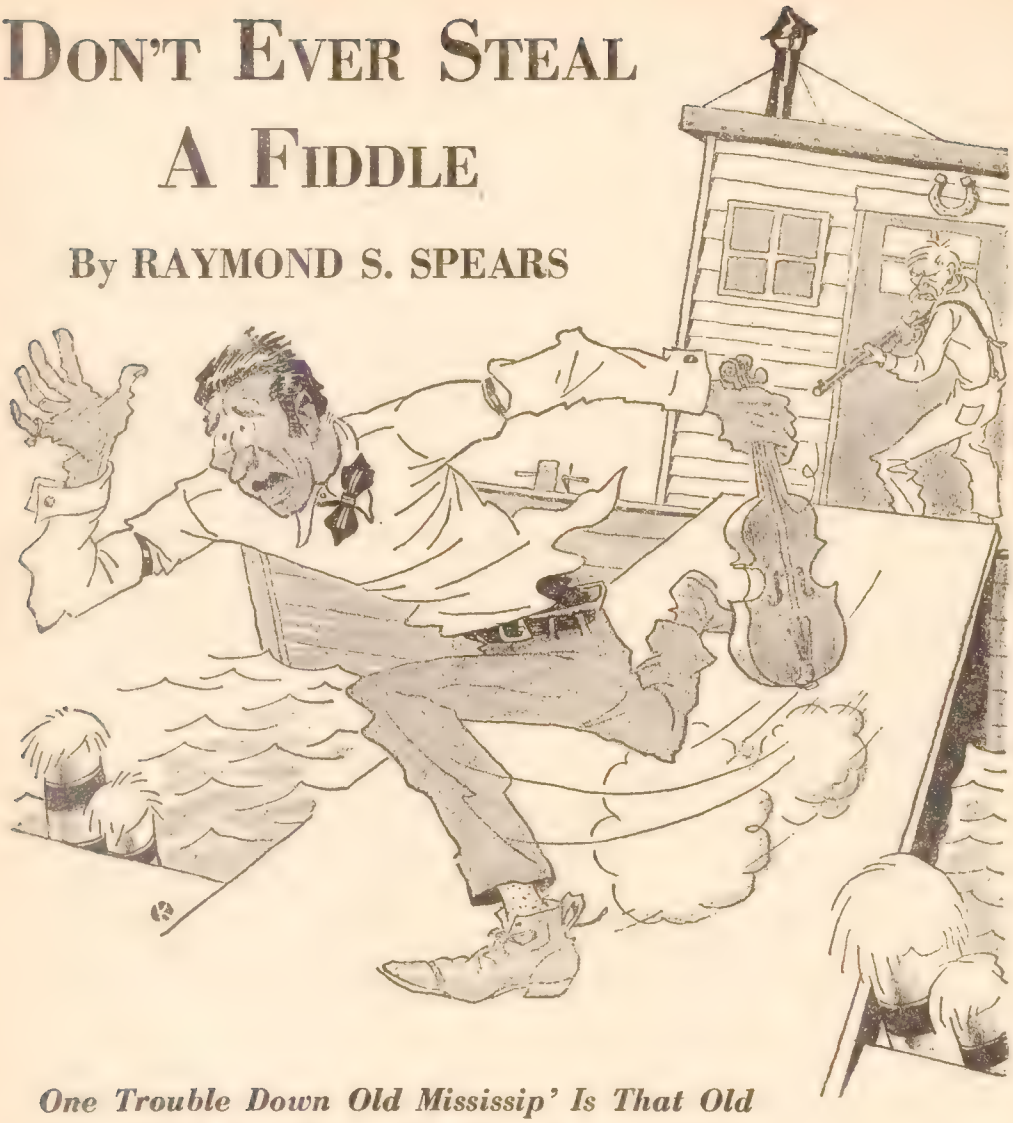
Under the table Bruce's hand found Carol's. Her eyes were shining, he knew that his own had the same thought as hers.

"Okay, sweethearts. Many a match is made in a hamburger heaven. Stay that way the rest of your lives."

"We intend to," said Carol and Bruce together.

Don't Ever Steal A Fiddle

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS



One Trouble Down Old Mississip' Is That Old Muddy Is Just Naturally Everybody's Alibi

A SCOW-HULL cabin boat floated down the open reach of Old Mississip' and, as the river was rising, it shunted over into Swan Neck Eddy. The cabin was white with blue trimmings at the corners and window frames. The hull was bright red. The ropes coiled and hanging from flatiron hooks on the cabin, bow and stern, were new and yellow. In fact, everything in sight looked new, 3-ply roofing, settling tin boiler on the stern deck, bumper cleats, board-sweeps, and a pike pole under the cabin eaves.

Up the bank from Swan Neck Eddy was a timber brake. There a fisherman had a tent, a pile of driftwood, net drying reel, and a brown shantyboat on skids. His name was Forster and Mrs. Forster was taking the clothes off her drying lines before afternoon dampness wet them. She noticed that boat going up the reverse current, coming down the edge of the main current and floating back up again, around and around.

"Jim-Ed!" she called her man, who was resting up after hauling his trap-nets up the long bend. "Hyars a boat a-drift! Cain't see nobody on it!"

Jim-Ed came out of the tent to look. He whooped as the boat came down again; the hull didn't even tremble from motions on board. Jim-Ed rowed out in a hurry and towed the drifter cornerwise out the main current across the eddy to the bank. Nobody had answered his hail. Mrs. Forster made two lines fast, up the bank, and Forster sparred the boat off with a gangplank at the bow and a bare lodgepole pine at the stern deck.

Then they both opened the bow door; there stood a man with a repeating shotgun leveled at them. He had a nightgown on, and a black cloth mask.

"Ain't yo' be'n long enough on the riveh to learn to mind yo' own business?" the man demanded.

"Yo' old fool, Jim-Ed!" Mrs. Forster said to her man. "Mout-a knowed a nice boat like this'n wouldn't be let to run loose for long. C'mon! Let's get gone!"

The fisherman and his wife went up the bank. They cast off the lines from bank stakes, and they gave the hull a shove with the gangplank and spar-pole. The boat went out into the eddy and up at the head of the reverse current it swung out into the main current. The man in a nightshirt and black hood hauled in the loose lines, pulled aboard the landing plank and spar-pole and a shunt in the current carried the hull down the current and away down the river where it diminished and began to sparkle, finally getting so far away they couldn't see it.

"That scoundrel must-a been a-bed and asleep," Mrs. Forster said. "Prob'ly deaf, too, an' didn't hear yo' holler."

"Mos' likely drunk," the fisherman grunted. "He's bad!"

"Worse'n bad," the wife shook her head. "He's mean! Nobody decent wears a mask tripping daytimes!"

"The Loadies wrote down they got a blue-trimmed boat," Mrs. Forster remembered. "Bright-new! Built at Point Pleasant, $250. Draped out las' spring on the tail of the spring tide. They'd neveh lay up on the Ohio bank. They should-a be'n down this-away 'fore now."

"I don't like the looks of that boat," Forster shook his head. "It don't look right, a feller wearin' a mask an' a almost white nightshirt, an' the sun's two hours up, yet!"

"None of ouh business!" the woman said. "Them white things of mine look yellerish. I dunno, I get disgusted, washing in this Mississippi water. The Tennessee was really purty green. Even settlin' don't he'p Old Mississip' much, not for washing it don't. Nice taste, though."

A WEEK later, when the water was cold from autumnal frosts, Forster was runnin' reeflines, getting a good catch of catfish, about 200 pounds a haul, when he thought he had a 200-pounder, or perhaps a sinker snag. When he got it up, it was the body of a woman. He was just going to cut the staging and let her sink again, weighted by a sinker, a real fancy navy-model anchor, about a 50-pound swing-hook. Then he recognized it was Mrs. Mina-Lou Loadie. He knew her, and besides she was his wife's sister. Of course, that wasn't the same as being a stranger. Besides if his wife ever knew he'd sunk her sister in Old Mississip' instead of burying her decent—she would be temperary as all get out.

Accordingly, Jim-Ed salvaged Mrs. Loadie and brought her around into Swan Neck Eddy, and Mrs. Forster kissed him gratefully, and they notified an undertaker who took her over the levee. Come to find out it was a coroner's case, a serious one, because she had been shot with a barrel of Double B shot—the autopsy recovered 57 of them, the whole load of a standard shell.

They had a coroner's jury, a sheriff's consideration, and all the legality fixings. Some people behind the levee and from several boats along down attended the funeral and the county paid all the expenses, because it was quite a serious proposition, a lady murdered, and not just an ornery found drowned.

The county court seat newspaper printed pieces about the case, and the *Mendova Battle-Ax* made quite a piece about Mrs. Loadie, because she was a very handsome young woman and lots of people up and down the Lower River knew things about her and she had been very popular. She had been in business for herself, before she married the first time, and everyone suspected that she had made a great deal of money, transporting, selling and making confiden-

tial products out of wild grapes, white corn and ribbon-cane molasses, depending on what was in season at the time.

Mrs. Forster went into extended mourning for her sister, and as the fishing season was gone by, catfish going down the line or lying out for the winter in deep waters, Forster listened to his wife and started down the river looking for that shantyboat with the blue trim and red hull.

THEY arrived at Arkansaw Delta just right for the Christmas-New Year holidays, but they lost track of the boat they were hunting for. It just dropped down the river, hardly noticed at all by lots of people. Then below the Horse Tail brakes, nobody saw the boat any more. Plenty of boats down that way were tied in along, but no 26 by 7 foot boats with blue-trims and white cabin, bright-red hull, were seen. After a few days, the Forsters made up their minds the scoundrel on board had repainted his cabin and trims, and perhaps his scow-hull by hauling it out on a towhead with a Spanish windlass. Anyhow, they weren't sure the boat had belonged to Mrs. Loadie, or that the fellow masked himself up on account of killing her and her husband—supposing him to have been killed up, too.

And then Bob Loadie came in just after Christmas and in time for the New Year festivities at the mouths of the Arkansaw. Bob wasn't very active, on account of somebody having shot him up the Ohio River below the Wabash Forks. He had been to town after supplies in his big skiff driven by an outboard. Somebody on board his boat just after dark had hauled off and let drive a charge of BBs. It was a good thing he was shot when he was. Only 22 BB shot hit him, and they penetrated only halfway or less than they would have done at closer range.

"I keeled over, shocked," Loadie said. "I suspected something was wrong but I lost my senses. The next day two sports saw me floating along down, so they towed me over to Preshville where they got a doctor and some of the handiest Double B shot were probed out. The rest of them they left where they were. I healed up real good, and I'm getting my strength back. I sure got a bone to pick with that scoundrel!"

Loadie didn't do any talking outside. The word from up the Ohio had been he was killed up, dying of his mysterious BB or goose shot wounds. As a matter of fact, a paper somewhere said that, and nobody bothered to correct it.

LOADIE, personally was a medicine man. He always traveled with a two-horse team in a canvas-hooded wagon. When he had happened to meet Mrs. Forster's noted sister, she was known by different names; this was best because the revenue authorities didn't know the ten or twelve women they were looking for to ask about licenses, revenues and charges of transporting, were all just one girl, and a real innocent one at that, just to look at her. Among her friends and relations she was known as Mina-Lou. River people in her set felt real bad, actually lonesome, for Mina-Lou had been the liveliest, kindliest and most entertaining of all the holiday crowds there at Arkansaw Delta Mouths. From the time she was only seventeen years old, she had lived on Old Mississip'. She had come down with her older sister, Mrs. Forster, who hadn't been sneezed at before she settled down and married.

Mina-Lou getting murdered made people sorry, and when her widower came down, he said that that killer had stolen his fiddle. Nobody played a fiddle better than Loadie. Selling medicine, he had drawn crowds and enchanted them into buying his Lik-Kah-Si-Kah Bitters.

"I cain't play!" he declared, when asked to do some dance music on the *Belle of the Bends* barge, but they persuaded him to try Marion Sugg's fiddle. When he got to playing, tasting and remembering, tears rolled down from his eyes, sweat from his brows off the end of his nose and down the fiddle to its neck.

The more he played, the worse he begrudged his fiddle being stole and nobody was surprised when Loadie declared he'd never rest in God's world again till he found the man who'd pirated his fiddle, murdered his wife and like to have shot him dead, to boot. But, of course, this seemed like mere talk.

Nobody had ever got a good look at that man who had come down the lower Ohio, over the Jumping Off Place at the Forks with the Mississippi, and down reach and bend in the lower river.

Looking for a man nobody could describe

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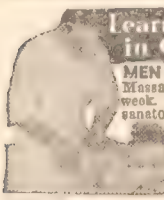

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down more than a thousand miles of mile-wide river seemed to be a hopeless waste of time. Loadie was told to forget it! Even his sister-in-law discouraged him. Mina-Lou was dead, gone, and buried, she had joined the mysteriously dead of long ago and more or less lately.

"Well—of course," Loadie admitted, "but he stole ouh boat and took my fiddle. If'n it was only just Mina-Lou and my boat it wouldn't be any different from lots of other shantyboat killings, but somehow, I cain't get over my fiddle being gone, too. I'd play an' Mina-Lou'd dance. I never saw anything purtier, not even at Palura's! I ust to laugh, hearin' tell about Old Mississip' callin'—pulling trippers down off the bank. Now I keep hearin' that old Muddy Gut callin' me, beckoning down the crossin's an' around the bends!"

THE word echoed up and down the lower river that Mina-Lou's man that used to be was dippy, going daffy. Lots of men got that way, if'n things happenstanced right. Killings got the killers off of their base; then again when somebody close was killed up, a husband, a wife, brother or sister, the one alive would get notions, ideas, and finally get queer. Loadie was real calm and sensible but something ailed him, showing in his eyes. He didn't talk any; he just came along, listening; he'd go to Saturday night doings in towns; he'd visit honky-tonks and black-and-tans, and all those different places, sitting back and watching, all alone.

When a man is kinda off his base, squinting his eyes, he's generally real pitiful, and here was probably the brightest medicine seller anywhere he'd ever operated and he wasn't trading anything. He turned down some of the best offers of grifting partnership ever made river tripping. He shook his head, all impatient. He had a power launch with a canvas hood, and he searched up and down, first one side then the other; he went into Old River lakes, up tributaries and down bayous—searching.

One thing was in his favor. The killer must have been a river rat, and that kind cain't be driven off Old Mississip'. That's where they belong. They couldn't live anywhere else. Only a river rat could have killed Mina-Lou and then waited to blast

down her husband, so he wouldn't have to worry about being followed and maybe gunned down. Perhaps he believed he had killed Loadie and so he felt safe. But come to find out, Loadie was hunting for him, and getting closer. Loadie located all the old river men and one by one he eliminated them; they hadn't been anywhere near the Ohio River Eddy below the Wabash when Mina-Lou was killed.

In that way he eliminated everybody! That's the trouble down Old Mississip'; that old Muddy Gut is just naturally everybody's alibi; and yet, come to count up alibis, nobody from St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Little Rock, on down, was absolutely in the clear. Everybody down or up that river was a suspicious character.

Loadie should have been buffaloed and reconciled. He wasn't. Settled in his heart was the determination to get revenge or die in his search for it. He raced up and down, back and forth. He played blow-harps mostly, but some of the time he picked a banjo. He kept no reasonable hours. He'd come into a shantyboat landing and play his banjo all night, keeping everyone awake, mourning and groaning his sorrow in the gloom. And then again people would hear music coming down a crossing, blowing like a steamboat whistle, tuned up like a calliope showboat—and no matter how calm, brave and disbelieving anybody was, hearing that lonesome man going by in the dark was like listening to the voices of the river murdered and sunk and lost.

Loadie's search seemed like a long, miserable time. It was two years and the second holidays he had mourned when he came down to Arkansaw Delta Mouths, and joined the Christmas and New Years doings. His face was wan, his eyes sorry, and his gait slow and mourning. At the same time he wouldn't drink anything but wild grape juice that Mrs. Mahna handled—wine like no other drink in the world. A pint bottle taste couldn't be forgotten; a quart bottle would change the meanest, chilliest, soggy winter day into genuine merriment.

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music wasn't for dancing. It was for listening and remembering—hoping. He was sure good listening when the mission boat *Stop Sinning* came in and music was needed between the exhortations.

PEOPLE came through Christmas, trippers far from their old homes and never hoping to go back—having become what they were—grateful to Loadie for having lifted them out of the gloom preaching had cast upon them. They were coming to New Years, limbering up, feasting, visiting around, enjoying themselves when a tall, slim, foreign-looking fellow dropped in. They all had seen him before. He'd come up the river from one of the foreign colonies that had sprung up here and there in the Gulf swamps, in cutovers, and in town quarters. His face was dark, his lips thin and whippy, and he packed a gun and a knife—out of sight but convenient and noticeable. He came aboard the *Belle of the Bends* prancing, whistling, and presently singing ecstatic and high-tenoring. Nobody liked him, but all liked his singing, whistling, performancing.

Here and there was somebody who had seen him in dance halls, honky-tonks and black-and-tans. He never had any pride—he'd pick up a guitar and sing to any audience—no matter who was in it. And so he led the merriment and started the dancing. A girl called to him:

"Hi-i, Moroxie—get your violin and play us right!"

He laughed, accommodating, went to his shantyboat and came back with a fiddle box. He had just absolutely twisted Loadie's nose out of joint—and Loadie was glad to see his doleful, repentent music replaced by the happy-go-luck of N'Orleans swing modified by Northern folktunes.

Accordingly, Moroxie drew his fiddle and tightened his strings and his bow. He drew a long sliding note and he began to play—play like he was enchanted, and the steppers on the deck were fairies or choruses of nymphs and goddesses. Nobody ever remembered hearing anyone playing like Moroxie that night. And Loadie sat back in a corner, watching and listening, feeling such emotions as a man has when a big hour has come to him. Loadie sat there all that evening

into midnight. Hearing such music, nobody paid any attention to Loadie.

Then Loadie slid out of the big dancing cabin of the *Belle of the Bends* and when Moroxie came out onto the gangplank over to Mrs. Mahna's boat where all hands were eating seriatim, a voice hailed him:

"Hi-i, Moroxie!"

Moroxie turned, and there stood Loadie with a repeating shotgun in his two hands, all ready for business. Moroxie turned white. That was his own repeating shotgun. Nobody would ever know how many he had killed with it, but he uttered a gasp of terror, pleading and hopelessness.

A charge of shot hit his throat. He pitched down into the river water and sank out of sight in the running current.

Some witnesses were indignant. They turned on Loadie and asked him if he'd gone clear crazy?

"Nope," he answered them, "I got my fiddle back!"

That was so. Come to be reminded, that had been Loadie's fiddle. They all remembered hearing him play it. No other fiddle on the river had the body and the tone of that fiddle. Everyone was glad he got it back.

Somebody said perhaps the authorities ought to be notified, but it wasn't clear what county Big Island was in, and perhaps it was Federal river jurisdiction. It was just anan-other river killing. A woman murderer had been overtaken and manhandled, needing it. Loadie just took possession of Moroxie's cabin boat, and there it was his own Point Pleasant built scow-hull. But it had been painted a camouflage blue-gray and the sunshades over the bow and stern decks had been torn off, so the genuine home-comfort looked different. But there it was, with a lot of new things and a phonograph, rifles, shotguns and such, that the river rat had been collecting, anything he could lay his hands on. He sure was a good riddance, that was certain. He'd never ought to have stolen a man's fiddle.

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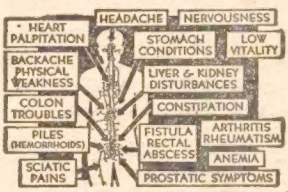

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The Story Tellers' Circle

(*Continued from page 6*)

vanished and it's now a country in which any man might be proud to live. Oil and irrigation have worked miracles. Where Mexican goats used to scramble for a living there are now some the country's finest truck farms and citrus groves, and many of the old trails and cart roads are now paved highways bordered by palms and the fine homes of prosperous people.

Far as I can learn, though, the wild inhabitants of the brush haven't changed much. True—the mustangs and wild pigeons are no more, but rattlesnakes are just as big and poison as their grandfathers, muskhogs are every bit as ornery as their grandmothers, mosquitos as blood-thirsty as their ancestors and gnats as cussed. I ran onto a denizen of the brush who—. Reckon I'd better tell you about him.

He's a Brahma bull (they pronounce it Bramer in Texas) and he's the biggest critter I ever saw outside of a zoo. We're drifting along down a road that looks like a canal through fifteen-foot brush when I spot this old boy. I can't hardly believe my eyes. He's eighteen hands high if he's an inch and his horns are tipped and he's just a-standin' there under a big old mesquite, sleepin' with one eye and watchin' me with his other. I stop, grab my camera, make certain that there's a four-wire fence between that bull and me, then I get out to take his picture. He's a difficult photographic subject, color blends with his surroundings somehow and the light is tricky, so it takes me a little while to get the gadgets in place and adjusted, and when at length I've got everything fixed proper I look at the bull again and—*he's coming towards me!*

That four-wire fence is mighty fragile. Our little old coupe is mighty small. If that bull don't want his picture took, I'm willing. I leave out from there.

Caddo Cameron

PS—The missus swears that the Brahma bull was walking slow and smiling. Maybeso, and maybe he's somebody's pet, but I don't give a hoot. He's too much cow for me to monkey with. *C. C.*

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